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BY L. ALLEN HARKER

THE VAGARIES OF TOD AND PETER

THE REALLY ROMANTIC AGE

THE BRIDGE ACROSS

MONTAGU WYCHERLY

ALLEGRA

CHILDREN OF THE DEAR COTSWOLDS

JAN AND HER JOB

THE FFOLLIOTS OF REDMARLEY

MISS ESPERANCE AND MR. WYCHERLY

MR. WYCHERLY'S WARDS

MASTER AND MAID

CONCERNING PAUL AND FIAMMETTA

A ROMANCE OF THE NURSERY

CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS

THE BROKEN BOW

✓
THE
BROKEN BOW

BY
Lizzie
L. ALLEN HARKER

NEW YORK
CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS

1924

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BOOK I
1909
THE LITTLE FRIENDS

“What is to come we know not. But we know
That what has been was good—was good to show,
Better to hide, and best of all to bear.
We are the masters of the days that were.
We have lived, we have loved, we have suffered
. . . even so.”

W. E. Henley.

CHAPTER I

I

LITTLE Hesper's heart was thumping in her ears when her mother parted from her at the bottom of the steps leading to the front door of Olveston House, "Select Academy for Young Ladies," in Brunswick Square.

There were twelve steps, shallow, spotlessly white, and, apparently, untrodden that morning.

They stretched before her, alarming in their prim parallelism, and she glanced down anxiously to see if her rather faltering feet had sullied their virgin fairness.

Luckily it was a dry day. She took courage and mounted to the top.

And even as Hesper's heart thumped and expanded in delicious terror and excitement, so did her mother's heart contract with a spasm of pain as the beloved little figure limped up the steps and Hesper's white, little face, with broad forehead and enormous eyes, was turned over her shoulder in a brave attempt to smile as she kissed her hand in farewell.

Would the other girls be kind to the child? Would any of them realize her fragility, her gentleness, her anxiety to please?

Just then a pony-trap drew up and a little girl jumped out of it and ran up the steps, calling imperiously to the groom, "Half-past four sharp, Kilby—not a second later, mind."

There was nothing fragile about this child. Straight and square-shouldered, with a mane of light brown hair streaming to her waist, she was a head taller than Hesper, who stood on the top step lost in admiring wonder. Hesper knew perfectly well who she was. Every one in Frampton Massey knew Squire Collett's granddaughter by sight. Big and handsome like all the Colletts, with wide, wine-brown eyes set far apart on either side of the arrogant, inquiring little nose; a fair skin that freckled easily, a delightful radiant smile that produced dimples and changed the proud expression to one of endearing friendliness.

The elastic of Hesper's hat was worn under her chin. Susan's was under her hair. This, at the very outset, gave Susan an advantage in Hesper's eyes. She noticed it at once, and, having already fallen in love with Susan's hair, was completely subjugated when Susan smiled at her, asking, "Have you rung, or d'you suppose we go straight in?"

"I'm not sure if we ought to be at this door at

all. I see other girls going down that path at the side."

"Oh, well, let's ring as we're here," Susan said, and gave the bell a vigorous pull.

The door was opened and Hesper turned to blow one last kiss to her mother before it closed again and swallowed them up.

II

"Bless her! Bless her! Bless her! Make them good to her and let her be happy—my precious little lady."

So, portly Mrs. Stowe, as, with tears in her eyes, she hurried from the somewhat shabby gentility of Brunswick Square towards the High Street.

A big woman, a heavy woman, yet a woman who moved easily and swiftly. Plainly dressed in good clothes, that were somehow so markedly prosperous and middle-aged that they made her look as though she were dressed for a character part.

When she reached High Street the clocks were striking nine, and she stood on the edge of the pavement to look at her own house. The shutters were just coming down from the large plate-glass window of "The Surprise." Even in a street of beautiful old houses it was noticeable. Even without the sign-board of three huge exclamation marks

in gilt on a black ground. Timbered, sharply gabled, with its three stories above the ground floor each extending beyond the other.

Mrs. Stowe crossed over and went in,

III

The thrills and adventures of Hesper's first morning at Olveston House culminated in the discovery that she and Susan were the only girls who, that day, were to remain for the midday dinner.

It was a silent meal. The Miss Foldacres and Miss Pope, a handsome, sulky-looking young woman who assisted them, were all rather fussed and tired. Susan, though still looking quite unabashed and observant, refrained from comment of any kind; and Hesper was too excited to eat, far less talk.

Miss Pope usually "took playground," but as there were only two girls, and both of them new, she saw that they put on their outdoor shoes and sought her own bed and a novel she had been reading in the train.

The playground, once a square garden, was now entirely covered with gravel, save for a thick hedge of lilacs at the side. At the far end there were two swings and two benches.

"Awful rot making us change our shoes every

time we go out for a minute," Susan said discontentedly. "I never do at home. Anyway, I *won't* wear a hat." And she flung hers back into the dressing-room.

Hesper watched her, rather shocked but still admiring. "What would you like to do?" she asked politely.

"I should *like* to get out of this and go somewhere, but I suppose I daren't, not the first day. Let's go and swing. Can you stand on the swing? Does it make you giddy?"

Hesper wasn't sure, and as she limped across the playground Susan inwardly decided that she'd better not.

"You sit on that bench a minute—it's jolly in the sun—and I'll see how high I can send this old swing."

She jumped up on the seat and stood, tall and straight, grasping the ropes, working herself to and fro, faster and faster, till it seemed to Hesper she had attained to an incredible speed. Her long hair streamed in the wind of her passing, her eyes shone, her cheeks took on a deeper rose, and the admiration so plainly visible on Hesper's upturned face spurred her to further efforts till the old posts seemed to sway, and the iron rings in the cross-bar creaked in protest.

Hesper grew frightened. "Oh, please don't go so high," she said; "it might break or something."

"It does sound rather groggy," Susan answered cheerfully, and slowed down.

"Don't you hate it here?" she asked, coming to sit beside Hesper.

"Oh, no. Why should I? They're all so kind."

"But it's so beastly dull; and I hate lessons—don't you?"

"Oh, no," Hesper exclaimed in astonishment. "I love them. I've only been allowed to do such a little, and I want to know things dreadfully—don't you?"

"Oh, no!" Susan mimicked her. "I don't, not a bit. What's the good?"

"It's so interesting—for one thing."

"But that's just what it isn't. How can you say it was interesting this morning?"

"Well, the exam. papers were silly, they were so easy; but I expect they thought . . . because we'd neither of us been to school before. . . . At least, I haven't."

"I don't know about 'easy'—except the arithmetic; that was potty."

"It was absurd," said Hesper. "I did all that three years ago."

"Gracious! How old are you?"

"I'm eleven."

"Why, *I'm* eleven. I thought you were about seven."

Hesper looked depressed. "I suppose," she said humbly, "it's because I'm so small."

"Never mind. I expect you're awfully clever, though," Susan said, "if you're so keen on learning."

"My brother is—awfully clever. He's taught me a lot."

"Taught you! Your brother!" Susan repeated in astonishment. "I'd like to see one of my brothers trying to teach me. I'd soon learn them something—except," she added, "to bat. David does coach me sometimes."

"My brother is much older than me. He was the cleverest boy in Frampton Massey. Mr. Payne told mother so."

"Who's Mr. Payne?"

"He's head master at the Grammar School. He said, '. . . I expect great things of your son, Mrs. Stowe, great things.' That's what he said."

"What else can your brother do besides be clever?"

"How d'you mean?"

"Well, what can he *do*?"

"I don't understand," Hesper said patiently. "Do what?"

"Well, what's his batting average?"

"I don't know."

"Is he in his school eleven?"

"He's not at school. He's at Cambridge. He's eight years older than me."

"Well, people play cricket at Cambridge. Has he got his blue?"

"I don't know what that is."

"You'd know fast enough if he'd got it. Was he in the footer fifteen at the Grammar School?"

"He played football . . . sometimes," Hesper said cautiously.

"Can he ride?"

"I don't think so."

"Can he row?"

"Oh, yes; he takes mother and me on the river. It's lovely."

"Is he tall?"

"Ye-e-s . . . rather . . ."

"Is he handsome?"

"It depends what you call handsome. I *love* his face."

"Well, we're all supposed to be handsome," Susan said, "though I don't see it's done us any good, and, I dare say, we shall all be hideous by the time we're grown up."

"I'm sure," Hesper said earnestly, "that you'll always be lovely. You are the loveliest person I've ever seen. . . . Very, very lovely, like the princess in a fairy-tale."

"You *are* a queer little kid," Susan exclaimed,

dimpling with pleasure. "You remind me somehow of Hamish and grandpapa."

"I'd like to look like your grandpapa," Hesper said eagerly, "but I don't see how it's possible."

"It's not in looks you're like him—not a bit—but the funny way you say things . . . sort of reminds me . . ."

"And who is Hamish?"

"Hamish is my Cairn terrier; and when he cocks his ears and watches my face he's like you—at least, you're like him. I feel I ought to give you a biscuit."

Hesper sighed. "There's the bell and some of the other girls coming. We'll have to go in. Thank you so much for talking to me."

"You *are* a funny little thing," Susan said. "But I like you. We'll be friends." And she put her hand under Hesper's arm to help her across the playground.

IV

In the dressing-room the three Miss Beebys were playing football with Susan's hat, which they had found on the floor.

Perceiving this, Susan rushed to their pegs, tore away their hats, kicked the lot down the steps into the playground, and was going after them

when the eldest Miss Beeby caught her by the hair and hung on to it hard.

"Beast!" Susan cried, and let out a good hard kick that caught her on the knee. She screamed and let go of Susan's hair, while her sisters flung themselves upon Susan with a shower of slaps and hair-tweakings.

Hesper stood trembling in a corner, trying to brush the dust from Susan's hat.

"Stop it!" Susan gasped. "Stop it, else you'll be sorry. I'll biff you in a minute. Stop it, I say!"

And sure enough Susan did biff the second Miss Beeby just under the jaw, and she ceased to slap Susan.

Meanwhile other girls had arrived, filling the doorway with shouts and gesticulations. The eldest Miss Beeby sat on the floor, sobbing, as she rolled down her stocking to observe the damage. The second Miss Beeby held her face and rocked to and fro, too indignant and astonished to cry. Susan, scarlet and dishevelled, held the wrists of the third Beeby sister while they did a sort of war-dance in the middle of the dressing-room.

Miss Foldacre, Miss Lucy and Miss Pope—Miss Pope, who ought to have been there to "keep the dressing-room," was last—all rushed upon the scene, and the noise diminished.

"What does this mean?" Miss Foldacre asked,

in a tragic voice. "Young ladies fighting! Young ladies in my school! Miss Collett, can you explain this conduct?"

Susan let go of Annie Beeby's wrists. "We've had a bit of a scrap," she mumbled, "and we all lost our tempers."

"She kicked our hats into the playground," Annie Beeby panted.

"Yes, she did; we saw her," voices corroborated from the door.

"But they were kicking . . ." Hesper began, when Susan cut her short with, "Shut up, you aren't in this at all."

"She turned on us like a tiger," Violet Beeby cried. "Look at my knee."

There was a large bruise.

"And she hit me in the face; dreadful she hit me," Clara Beeby took up the tale.

"But why?" asked the bewildered Miss Fold-acre.

Nobody answered.

"Well, it was all very disgraceful," Miss Lucy said briskly, "but we can't waste any more time over it now. Get back to the schoolroom, all of you, as quickly as possible."

Going down the passage, Susan whispered to Violet Beeby, "I'm sorry about your knee, but even the boys never pull my hair. I've got such a tender head."

v

"Well, well," Miss Lucy said when all the girls had gone home. "I suppose we're lucky to have two new girls in the summer terms, even if one of them is rather quarrelsome. After all, she'll only be here one term."

"I wish now that the other had waited till the autumn," Miss Sophia said. "I can't feel that Miss Collett would like it, if she knew, having her niece at the same school with a confectioner's daughter. . . ."

"You can't choose the girls to please Miss Collett, Sophia. Why, you know very well they're none of them 'county,' and never will be. And if it wasn't that there's no High School or girls' department in the Grammar School, we shouldn't have any children at all. I'm glad enough to get Hesper Stowe. A nice, well-spoken, gentle little thing she seems to me, and it's sad for her, being lame. Extremely pretty manners she has. I've always heard that Mrs. Stowe has brought her up like any little lady."

"I dare say, I dare say," Miss Sophia allowed, "but the fact remains there is the shop—that restaurant. So odd to call it 'The Surprise,' as if it was a public-house. It is licensed too, which seems so very . . . And I've heard—I hope it isn't true—that she tastes the wines and things

herself before she buys them . . . like any man."

"And what if she does?" Miss Lucy demanded stoutly. "If she sells wine she ought to know whether it's good or bad. And you know the quantities of people that dine at 'The Surprise' in summer, so as to go on the river afterwards. Even such grand people motoring from miles and miles away, drinking the best champagne like water. It is a surprise to find a place run like that in a little country town."

"Well, thank goodness, she doesn't *live* over it now, that's one thing. If she had, I don't think I could ever have consented to take her little girl. As it is, I am dubious. It seems a lowering of the tone of the school, and I'm not at all sure . . ."

"Now don't be ridiculous, Sophia, all sorts of grand people have shops now, and I'm sure I don't blame them if they can make any money at it, for money's hard enough to come by any other way. We're in the twentieth century, Sophia, the ninth year of it, and it's no use thinking things are the same as they were in the nineteenth, for they're not."

VI

Hesper had been very lonely since they moved to The Nook, in Wolseley Road. There was always so much to look at in the High Street. Even in

winter there were market days, and in summer it was gay indeed. When increase of business drove Mrs. Stowe's family to the top floor and the attics, there was still always a window-seat where a deeply interested little girl could watch motors drive up and deposit guests who, in summer, went through to the back to have tea in the garden. Then would Hesper also hurry through to the back and from the window of her own room track the party to a table under the trees. On warm days, when all the windows were open, scraps of conversation would float up to her (this was what her mother objected to), and she would tell herself long stories about the people. If they were young and attractive, they were straightway woven into the tales in the Red Fairy Book.

She would have loved to lie out in her long chair in the pretty garden sloping to the river, and to watch the gay visitors having tea; but her mother wouldn't hear of it. Customers would certainly stare at her. They might even speak to her, and inquire what was the matter, and Hesper hated to be asked about her lameness.

But all day long there was something to interest one at "The Surprise," and sometimes kindly folk, looking up, would notice the little watching face so high above the busy street, and wave to her, and she would gleefully wave in return, feeling warmed and befriended by their notice.

There was nothing to watch at The Nook. Even the garden, though very tidy, was uninteresting, with its square patch of lawn, red-brick walls, and neatly trimmed laurels. It was a geranium-calceolaria-petunia-lobelia-marguerite sort of garden. And in front of the dining-room window there grew a monkey tree which looked so sinister and grasping that Hesper was quite afraid of it.

VII

The doctor was passing "The Surprise," and looked in to see Mrs. Stowe in her office.

Young, keen, and progressive, he was interested in Hesper, who thought him like a fairy prince, because he was so kind and good-looking.

"Well, how's the scheme answering? How is Hesper getting on at school?"

"She seems happy enough, but so far as the education goes, I don't believe she'll learn anything at all."

"Good!" he said heartily. "Couldn't be better. That's just exactly what I hoped. Hesper's all mind and spirit. She's like a little flame that has been fanned till it consumes all the fuel it's got over it. Does she play with the other children? Has she made any friends?"

"She's made one. At least, she's crazy about one girl there—you know Hesper's way—utterly

taken up with anyone that interests her. I'm a bit worried about it."

"Worried! Why?"

"Because I know it can't come to much, and when it ends, as it will end, Hesper'll suffer. It's so easy to hurt her, unfortunately. She's so thin-skinned."

"You're very pessimistic, Mrs. Stowe. Aren't you rather making mountains out of molehills? Who is the child?"

"Little Susan Collett, from Aylberne Manor."

"Why, what on earth is she doing at that school?"

"I can't think; but there she is, and somehow or other she and Hesper have struck up one of those tiresome friendships that seems somehow to cut them off from all the other girls. I can't explain it. You know what a real child Hesper is, and how she longed for other children, and now she's there and got them, she doesn't seem to be aware of any other girls, only this Susan Collett. I'm quite concerned about it, for, of course, I know perfectly well the Collett child will never be allowed to keep Hesper as a friend afterwards, whatever they may do now—and she *feels* things so."

Mrs. Stowe's large lined face was turned towards the doctor, and for the hundredth time in their acquaintance he wondered how such a shrewd, practical woman came to be the mother of this

fragile, nervous child, who seemed to have her being in an intense emotional and intellectual life, a world away from everything that was ordinary or common or rough. How had she managed, this stout, common-sensical woman, to keep her little daughter so entirely unspotted from the middle-class, hearty, business community in which she spent her own laborious days?

A pity she *had* managed it, the doctor thought.

“I’ve seen that Collett child from time to time, and if you’d asked me I’d have said she was the last little girl in the world to attract or be attracted by Hesper. She’s a wild little devil, born naughty, always in mischief; but I expect she was lonely too. Parents in India, brothers all at school, a not particularly sympathetic aunt, and her grandfather buried deep in Archæological Records. Mind, I don’t believe there’s the least harm in the child, but she’s just as beef and pudding as Hesper is ethereal: a capital friend for her. You leave them alone. What Hesper wants more than anything else is a little wholesome neglect and mental hardening, and I should say the Collett child’s likely to give her that. You’ve wrapped her in cotton-wool from the day she was born.”

And yet, he reflected, as he went on his rounds, there must be a curiously strong streak of imagination somewhere in Mrs. Stowe herself. The child’s name, for instance. Hesper—the evening star;

because, when she was born, Emma Stowe was forty-eight years old and her only son nearly nine.

Then look what she'd done with the business since Samuel Stowe, decent, unenterprising little confectioner, had died ten years ago. The woman had taste. She had an eye for colour and form and grouping as well as for good catering. To be sure she dropped an "h" occasionally, and, when she was eager or excited, betrayed by her accent that she had been born well within the sound of Bow Bells.

The doctor was fond of her and admired her. She was so capable and intelligent; jolly too, and sensible about everything except those children of hers. They were her religion. She had set them up like an altar in her heart, in a sort of holy place, and spent herself to keep it fair and seemly.

He shook his head.

No good, he thought, comes of trying to bring up children to be too refined for their surroundings. There was that boy at Cambridge. Well, well, poor Emma Stowe would probably find out the mistake she was making before so very long.

CHAPTER II

I

SUSAN and her grandfather were having tea together in the library at Aylberne. She liked having tea alone with him. There were always more and better cakes in the library than at schoolroom tea. She wondered why: for grandpapa never ate anything but one piece of thin, dry toast.

He was so different from Aunt Myrtle. He never said, "That's enough, Susan; you seem to have overlooked the bread-and-butter." Grandpapa, if he noticed at all, would say, "Have you tried the ones with the pink icing, Susan? They look more interesting than those yellow scones."

Grandpapa was a dear.

"And you're happy at this little school?" he asked, in his kind voice. "You like your school-fellows?"

"I like one of them most awfully. The others are all right, but I'm not very keen on them. Grandpapa, need I go that silly walk every day between twelve and one? I *do* hate it so."

"But if it's a rule, Susan?"

She munched steadily for a minute. You mustn't answer grandpapa with your mouth full—"I'm sure if you wrote and said you didn't like me to, they wouldn't mind."

"But what would you do instead? You couldn't be left all by yourself. And fresh air and exercise are considered so necessary."

Mr. Collett spoke diffidently. He wasn't particularly fond of either himself.

"But I shouldn't be by myself, Grandpapa; that's just it. I'd stay with my little friend. Think of it, Grandpapa! Two and two through the park to the river and back by Mercer Road. Always the same sort of walk, eight of us, counting Popey with her long nose, walking—walking—not to anything or to do anything, but just walking. If I must have that sort of exercise, can't I walk home in the evening instead? It's only three miles."

"I'm afraid that would never do, Susan. Aunt Myrtle wouldn't like that at all—and I shouldn't like it myself. But you haven't told me what you would do between twelve and one if you didn't go for a walk with the others."

"I'd play in the cat-run and talk to Hesper. She's lame, that's why she can't go for walks; so she lies out there in a long chair, and I could sit on the end of it and we could talk and talk. I'd

love that, Grandpapa. I never see her enough, only in snippets and scraps, and odds and ends of scribbles and whispers, and we've got such a lot to tell one another, and I don't see how we're ever to manage it. *Can't* I stay with her mornings?"

"I see your point, my child; I see your point. But you're not lame, thank God, and there's really no reason why you shouldn't walk with the others, so I'm afraid I mustn't interfere with the regular routine of the school. It wouldn't be fair. I'm sorry, but . . ."

"Then what's to be done? How am I ever to talk to Hester? Talk enough? Listen, Grandpapa, may I ask her here one half-holiday? Next Wednesday's the nearest. Will you let me have her next Wednesday? Let me bring her home to luncheon with me in the bucket . . . and I'm sure we could send her back in the evening after tea, couldn't we? That would be one long, lovely afternoon. Oh, Grandpapa, *will* you?"

Susan abandoned her important post behind the teapot and flung herself upon her grandfather, clasping him round the neck and squeezing her face against his in an agony of supplication.

"Why not? Why not?" he gasped, from beneath her strangle-hold. "I think that's an excellent plan. . . . Sit up, Susan dear, you're rather heavy."

"You are a darling," she cried ecstatically. "You've made me so happy—but . . . you'll have to write a note, you know."

"Certainly. To whom do I write—to Miss Foldacre?"

"No. I think it would be best to write to her mother. Mrs. Stowe's her name, and the address is The Nook, Wolseley Road."

"Ah! One of those dreadful new villas, I expect."

"Never mind the villa just now, Grandpapa," Susan said hurriedly. "It's not coming to tea. Will you write the note soon?"

"Directly we've finished tea."

"You'll say it nicely, you'll explain how much I want it? You think they'll let her come?"

"Unless she has some other engagement, I see no reason why her mother shouldn't let her come. Tell me more about her. Did you say her name was Hester?"

"Hes-per, Grandpapa, not 'ter.' Mind you spell it right. She's perfectly sweet. Very little, with short funny hair and a whispery voice, and . . . Oh, I don't know how to say it. She's different somehow, and I do love her most awfully."

"Are you in the same class?"

"I really don't know. I don't understand their classes. We do some things at the same time,

but she's far cleverer than any of us; and, it's awfully funny, she *enjoys* lessons, she really does."

"I suppose," Mr. Collett said thoughtfully, "that is rather unusual."

"Have you finished now, Grandpapa? Will you write the note? And will you seal it with your red sealing-wax?—and may I squash the seal down on it?"

II

They drove along white roads between tall, ragged hedges exquisite in their early summer green. They turned in at great gates with pillars crowned by carved stone eagles holding the Collett coat of arms, and along an avenue of elm trees, to the friendly, beautiful old manor-house.

They arrived just in time for luncheon with grandpapa, and sat, one on each side of him, at the head of a long polished refectory table, where generations of Colletts had broken bread. Such a high table it was that Gosslin, the old butler, brought a fat cushion to raise Hesper.

Hungry Susan, who always wanted a second helping, said very little. The squire, as usual, dreamed through his meal. Hesper picked at her food like a fastidious wren and looked, and looked, and looked.

It seemed a long luncheon to Hesper, but at last the squire finished his coffee and Susan asked, "Can we come with you, Grandpapa, just to let Hesper see the library before you settle for the afternoon? Then we needn't bother you again, for we're going to have tea in the schoolroom—unless you'd like her to come and say good-bye. Would you, Grandpapa?"

Of course he would like it, and he held out a courteous aiding hand as Hesper limped across the hall.

Trustfully she thrust hers into it: such a hot, fluttering little hand.

"We've got the book you wrote about the Abbey," she said. "My governess used to read it to me, and then we went and found the bits we'd read about, and it was . . . thrilling."

He strolled with Hesper round the great golden room—golden in the mellow light reflected from rows upon rows of books bound in yellow calf—taking down one here and another there to show her pictures, till Susan got rather bored and said firmly, in Aunt Myrtle's very tones, "We mustn't tire Grandpapa, Hesper. He always has a rest after luncheon. Come on out and I'll show you the Nuns' Walk."

And Hesper came on out, hurriedly, and sadly afraid she had been tiresome and trespassing;

the one pang in an otherwise entirely happy day.

They first went to the stables to fetch two fat foxhound puppies that Miss Collett was walking for the Hunt, and then straight to the Nuns' Walk, a curious avenue of old yew trees, whose topmost branches, interlacing, formed a continuous arch. About a hundred yards long and some four wide, it led down an incline from a terrace in the wild garden to a stretch of grass bordered by a sunk fence, and beyond that by a big field. Hamish rushed off after an imaginary rabbit, and the two tubby little foxhound puppies lolloped after him a long way behind. Hamish disapproved of the puppies and gave them a nip when he was sure no one was looking, but all the same the puppies admired and adored Hamish, and couldn't keep away from him.

Coming from the bright sunshine of the garden, it seemed hushed and solemn in the green gloom.

Hesper looked up at the interlacing branches overhead. "It's like the Abbey cloisters," she said softly. "They're all twisty and knotted too—and oh, Susan, look at that tree!"

Framed in the dark arch of yews, at the far end, sharp against the blue sky, was a double cherry in full bloom. A foam of white in garlands and sprays and masses. "Oh, Susan, doesn't it look glad?"

There was something in Hesper's voice that made Susan turn and look at her. Hesper's eyes were full of tears, and in her little heart-shaped face was a sort of quivering radiance.

Puzzled, Susan put her arms round her little friend. "Funny kid," she said, giving her a hug. "Don't be sad about it. Grandmamma planted it ages ago when she first came to Aylberne. She used to call it the White Nun. Why should it make you so dismal?"

"I'm not dismal, but beautiful things do somehow make one feel like that."

"Not me," Susan said, "but you're different—a funny kid," and she hugged Hesper again. "Come on and see our garden. It's all of our garden. We can do just what we like in it, and we *do*."

She led Hesper to a little square Dutch garden with stone paths and box hedges. It was most untidy, and looked, as Punch's gardener said, "as if someone 'ad done it 'is self," for the beds were in a state of chaos and upheaval, and the only thing that looked at all permanent was a small stone statue in the centre, a fat cupid in the act of shooting off an arrow, who stood on a short Corinthian column.

"Things don't seem to have come up much as yet," Susan remarked apologetically, "and, now the boys are all at school, I have to see to it by myself,

and I haven't much time with being a dayer at Olveston House. The crocuses are over, and somehow the tulips didn't come up."

"What a pity his bow's broken," Hesper said, as she stroked a fat little shoulder.

"I did that," Susan answered importantly, "this spring. The sparrows were stealing my crocuses most dreadfully; as fast as they came up the wretches nipped them off, and I tried throwing stones at them, and one of 'em hit the little chap's bow, and broke off the point."

"Couldn't it be mended?" Hesper asked. "He's such a pretty little boy."

"I dare say it could be mended, but that would mean telling Aunt Myrtle, and ever such a row. She hardly ever comes here, and when she does I hope it'll be with one of the boys, and they can truthfully say it wasn't them."

Later, as they were sitting under a cedar tree on the lawn, Susan said suddenly, "Let's vow we'll always be friends, and when we're grown up let's have a little house together, with nobody to bother us and do just what we like."

"I'd have to go and see Mother and Alf pretty often, but I'd love to live with you part of the time . . . but would they let you?"

"When I'm grown up I shan't ask 'em. I shall live where I please, and with the person I like best."

"But shan't we need a great deal of money to do that? I know Mother would give us what she could, but . . ."

"We'll get enough money somehow," Susan replied intrepidly. "I know they wouldn't *give* me any, for there doesn't seem to be much in our family; but perhaps we could keep a shop or something—one where we'd sell kittens or puppies would be awful sport. I know there *are* shops like that, for I've seen one in London. But we wouldn't have it there. . . ."

"A shop!" Hesper echoed in astonishment. "Why, it's because of 'The Surprise' Mother said you'd never be allowed to be really friends with me, not afterwards . . ."

"After what?"

"Well, after you've left Olveston House."

"Rot! I shall always be friends with you."

"And then when Mr. Collett wrote that nice note I said, 'There, now, *he* doesn't mind.' But Mother didn't seem to be very sure. He doesn't really mind about 'The Surprise,' does he?"

Hesper's large, wistful eyes were fixed on Susan's face, which turned exceedingly red. "I don't think," she said slowly, "that it ever came into Grandpapa's head. He's not like that. . . . Besides," she added, "I don't think he knows."

III

Hesper was in bed and ought to have been asleep, but she would not let her mother go.

There was so much to tell about her wonderful, her delicious afternoon.

"You needn't hurry, Mother. Alf isn't here waiting for his supper. Now, isn't Susan a nice friend for me? You do think so, don't you?"

"From all you tell me, she seems well enough," Mrs. Stowe said, without enthusiasm, "but I don't see anything to rave about, and I wouldn't go and set too much store upon her if I was you. You can't give me any real reason why you're so taken up with this girl—and it's like this, my poppet, she comes out of the top drawer, and you, because of me, come out of the bottom, and there's an end of it."

"It won't be in the end with us. Susan and me will always be friends. We promised each other this afternoon. We vowed it for ever and ever. Mother, I *can* tell you why I love Susan so. Do you know, never once not all this long time I've known her, has she asked me anything about my leg. All the other girls have, but never Susan—never a word—and yet she always helps me and makes things nice and easy for me. Why, this very afternoon she trundled me about in the gardener's wheelbarrow all over the place, so's I

shouldn't be tired, and when we went in to tea she called Mr. Gosslin and told him to carry me upstairs, because it's such a long way, and they're such slippery stairs—no carpet. You know Mr. Gosslin?"

"An' did he carry you?"

"Yes, he did, ever so kind, and said I was a featherweight. Mother, now *we* must ask Susan to tea, mustn't we?"

"No, my dear, that would never do."

"But why not, Mother? I *promised* Susan I'd ask her. Oh, Mother, we simply must."

The thin arms clasped her neck. The eager, flushed face was pressed against her own.

"Hesper, my lamb, I'd so much rather not. You don't understand all the ins and outs, and I don't want us to get snubbed."

"Snubbed, Mother! Who's going to snub us? Susan wants to see you and Alf—only he won't be back—and my home, though what she wants to see most is all over the inside of 'The Surprise.' Could we take her and show her?"

"Certainly not. I won't hear of *that*, and I'd much rather not ask her at all. I never was one to push myself, except in a business way. . . ."

"But it isn't pushing ourselves if Susan wants to come. . . . You know, Mother, it's funny, but 'The Surprise' is a bit like Aylberne. Not so big or grand, but it's got the same sort of feel

about it—even if it is over a shop. But we won't take her if you'd rather not. She'll be quite happy here with me. You'll ask her soon, won't you, Mother?"

CHAPTER III

I

N EARLY a month had passed before Hesper, by dint of incessant and persistent pleading, got her mother to write the note that invited Susan to spend an afternoon at The Nook.

Susan would fain have hurried matters so as to get acceptance and visit accomplished before her Aunt Myrtle's return; but the same delicacy that kept her silent regarding Hesper's lameness prevented her in any way reminding her little friend of the promise, and the day Hesper brought the long-expected note to school was the one selected by Miss Collett for her return.

When Susan reached Aylberne, Aunt Myrtle came out into the hall to greet her. A friendly, affectionate Aunt Myrtle, full of interesting news and cheerful plans. Susan, pleased that she was bidden to share tea in the library on this first day, warmed to her aunt and, for the moment, quite forgot the precious note.

Directly she had gone upstairs after tea, she remembered it, and went back.

Her grandfather was standing on the hearthrug, laughing at something Aunt Myrtle had just said. He looked animated and roused. Already there seemed a suppressed but pleasant bustle throughout the still, old house.

Susan advanced upon him, holding out the note.

Aunt Myrtle had moved from the tea-table and was sitting in a low chair by the fire. The squire never gave up fires till July, and not then if it was chilly.

He opened the note, Aunt Myrtle and Susan both watching him as he read it. Then he handed it to his daughter, saying, "This is your province, my dear, now that you are back. Have you any objection to Susan's spending a half-holiday with her little friend?"

Fidgety Susan stood where she was, curiously quiescent. Just as she had eagerly watched her grandfather reading the note, so now she watched her aunt; but warily, and her wine-brown eyes were clouded with foreboding.

Miss Collett looked puzzled.

"Who is this Mrs. Stowe?" she asked. "I've never met a Mrs. Stowe here that I can remember, and I thought I knew everybody. Is she the mother of one of the girls at that little school? I thought I told you, Father, that it would be better for Susan not to have anything to do with

the girls there, except *at* the school. She's only there for one term."

"Grandpapa knows Hesper," Susan broke in. "He liked her awfully, didn't you, Grandpapa?"

The squire looked helplessly from his slightly censorious daughter to his rigid granddaughter. There was something in the set of Susan's uplifted chin that meant trouble for somebody. Of that he was sure. And, just as he hated draughts or violent exercise, so did he hate unpleasantness; domestic disquiet most of all.

"The little girl who came here was quite charming," he said, with a deprecating glance in Miss Collett's direction. "*She* was Hesper, wasn't she?"—to Susan.

"Yes, Grandpapa, and now she wants me to go to lunch and tea with her next Wednesday, and I can, can't I?"

Supplication and defiance were subtly mixed in Susan's voice. The squire realized the supplication, and her aunt was acutely conscious of the defiance.

"Perhaps, Susan," she said quietly, "you can enlighten me as to this Mrs. Stowe. Who is she?"

"Hesper's mother."

"Yes, but you know more about her than that. Is this Hester a boarder?"

"Her name's not Hester," Susan said sulkily.

"It's Hes-per, and she's not a boarder. There aren't any boarders. She's a dayer, like me."

"Are they townspeople, then?"

"Yes."

"Don't speak so rudely, Susan. How often have I told you that you mustn't say 'Yes' and 'No' like that. You don't mean to say they're tradespeople? What is this child's father?"

"Dead," Susan answered.

"Susan, you are concealing something," Miss Collett said anxiously. "How can you expect me to let you go to tea with this child if you wcn't tell me anything about them?"

"The note was to Grandpapa."

Grandpapa had moved unobtrusively to the far end of the room and was, apparently, immersed in a book he had taken from the shelves.

"You don't gain anything by being impertinent," Miss Collett said. "If you can't or won't tell me about these people, of course I must refuse to let you go to their house. Surely you must know that."

Susan cast one despairing glance at her grandfather's back and saw that he had failed her. Then she faced her aunt and said slowly, "Mrs. Stowe has a shop, but they don't live there. They've got quite a nice house in Wolseley Road."

"Where and what is the shop?"

"It's 'The Surprise.' You've been there often."

"And this woman has the impertinence to ask you—*you*, my niece—to her house!"

"I want to go most awfully. Hesper's been here, and I want to go there. Can I?"

Miss Collett in her turn looked at her father's back at the far end of the long room. "Ask your grandfather," she said shortly.

Like an arrow loosed from a bow, Susan sped across the room. "Grandpapa," she cried, clutching his arm, "say I may go. Tell Aunt Myrtle what a darling Hesper is. Try to make her understand!"

The unfortunate squire was fairly cornered. His daughter held him with her compelling gaze. His impetuous granddaughter pulled at him literally and figuratively. He sympathized with the eager Susan, but, as always, bowed before the good sense of the handsome Myrtle.

"I think," he said feebly, "you must allow your aunt to judge in this matter. . . . We never have . . . er . . . visited with the townspeople, and perhaps . . . your father and mother wouldn't like it. We have to consider them, you know . . . so far away."

The warm, eager young hand dropped from his arm. Susan gave him one long look and left him and the room.

"Et tu, Brute," he murmured to himself, as

he replaced the book, of which he hadn't even seen one line.

When he came back to the consciousness of his daughter's conversation, he heard her saying "It's certainly more than time that I was home."

II

The end of the term, and Susan against all rules had managed to meet Hesper at the end of Wolseley Road.

"It's . . . It's just blasted nonsense," she exclaimed, with a half-sob.

"Susan dear," Hesper exclaimed in horror, "you mustn't say that—it's swearing!"

"I don't care if it is swearing. I want to swear. I know lots worse words than that—damn and bloody and . . ."

Hesper put her hand over Susan's mouth. "You mustn't," she said, "else they'll think you've learned it from me. Perhaps that's why they want to stop you going with me."

Susan kissed the little hand that lay so tenderly across her lips before she pulled it away.

"*That's* blasted nonsense if you like. Only yesterday I heard Kilby say to Cottle—he was holding his back—'I've got them blasted screws again' . . . and I've heard Daddy say 'damn,' and men outside the 'Waggon and Horses' say

'bloody.' It's in the Litany too, and in that old Shakespeare you're so fond of, so it can't be a very bad swear. Listen! I've got a plan! I shall tell Aunt Myrtle that your mother has forbidden you to go with me because I swear so—that'll learn her."

"But it wouldn't be true," Hesper faltered.

"It'll annoy her just as much as if it was."

"But you're going away and I shan't see you any more . . . and you'll forget all about me. . . ." Hesper's large pathetic eyes filled with tears which rolled over and ran down her pale cheeks. ". . . I don't suppose they'd let you write to me. . . . ever."

"I'll try and write somehow—though I can't promise, and I'm a poor hand at it—but writing doesn't matter. I shan't forget you. I promise. I swear. I cross my heart. Even if we have to wait till we're grown up to be friends together, I'll never forget. Nobody can stop us then."

"It seems such a long time till we're grown up," Hesper said sadly.

"I'll see you somehow—you can bet I do. Was your mother very cross when Aunt wouldn't let me come?"

"No; all she said was, she didn't think it would have hurt you."

The Abbey clock struck five.

"I must run or else I shall catch it most awfully.

Kiss me, dear, darling Hesper. I'll come and see you once before I go to school—you see if I don't. We shall be back from Scotland before that. I'll come if I die for it. Cheer up!"

CHAPTER IV

I

WOLSELEY ROAD, on a wet afternoon in late September, looked particularly prim and dreary as Susan made her way along the middle of it, looking for The Nook. She had been allowed to come into town alone in the motor to collect various parcels needed for school outfits. Aunt Myrtle, with four of them to get off that week, was so busy that she was glad to utilize even Susan, and Susan had jumped at the chance. At their very first stopping-place she handed over Aunt Myrtle's list to Cottle, the chauffeur, and, mumbling something about being "fitted," promised to meet him outside the Abbey at four o'clock.

A bronzed, tall Susan; newly back from Nairn; swinging along in a Burberry and an old hat pulled down over eyes that danced in delighted expectation.

How surprised Hesper would be. Susan was sure she would be in. Hesper was never allowed to go out in the wet, and the last weeks had been very cold and wet. Everybody at Aylberne said

so. It always rained in Scotland too, but no one took any notice of rain in Scotland.

Ah, there it was! "The Nook" in black letters on the gate-posts.

Would Hesper be looking out of the window with her dear little Hamish face?

Long white curtains meeting in the middle shrouded the downstairs windows. Short white curtains across the upper ones.

Not a sign of a face anywhere.

She mounted the steps, rang the bell and gave a loud double knock in imitation of Cottle.

A surprised-looking elderly servant opened the door.

"Is Miss Hesper at home?" Susan asked, smiling at her in excited anticipation.

The servant stared at her. "Haven't you heard, Miss?" she asked.

Susan's heart sank. Could Hesper be gone on a visit? Then she *must* write. "Is she away from home?"

The woman still stared at her in that queer, uncomfortable way. "Why, she was buried on Monday, poor little thing. Only ill a few days, she was; and went out like the snuff of a candle."

"Do you mean she's dead?" Susan asked, with stiff, dry lips.

"Won't you come inside, Miss?" the servant said kindly. "You do look shook."

But Susan turned slowly from the door.

The woman did not follow her—it was too wet. “Mr. Alf took his ma away directly after the funeral,” she called. “It’s bin a dreadful blow to both of them, poor things. She’s buried up at the cimetary—lovely flowers, there was, all white. They won’t be faded yet, I don’t suppose, if you’d like to go an’ see them.”

Then she shut the door, for Susan neither answered nor looked back.

Slowly, with dragging feet, she walked on the gravelled sweep that circled the monkey tree Hesper had disliked. At the gate she stopped and with both hands held on to the top bar.

All her life she will remember that the servant’s collar was fastened crookedly, with a brooch shaped like a horse-shoe, that she had a long chin with a scratch on it, and showed her gums when she talked.

Hesper was dead.

It was intolerable this pain, this extraordinary strangling, incomprehensible pain.

What was she to do?

How could she stop it?

When she shut her fingers in the window and one of them was so badly crushed that she lost her nail afterwards, she had borne it—grand-papa had said she was a Trojan—but this . . .

this was worse. Her knees were shaking. What was the matter with her legs?

Never to see Hesper any more, never to listen to her stories and bits of poetry—Hesper knew such lots of poetry. Never to plan about the little house they would have together. There would be no little house now. And she had hurt Hesper, against her will—oh, much against her will!—but Hesper had been hurt when she couldn't come to tea at The Nook.

Oh, why were grown-up people stupid and cruel like that?

It had been dreadful enough last time when dad and mummy went back to India when the boys went to school and she was left alone at Aylberne with grandpapa and Aunt Myrtle. Ah, grandpapa—grandpapa had failed her. He *knew* what Hesper was like, yet he had not stood up for her. Grandpapa was afraid of Aunt Myrtle.

Never could she go and see Mrs. Stowe or that "Alf" Hesper was so fond of. They'd hate the sight of her because she had hurt Hesper. They'd never know how she loved her. Nobody would ever know. That was the dreadful thing about this pain. Nobody would know. Nobody could understand.

She never remembered how she got back to the Abbey. She was very late, and Cottle was inclined to be cross till he saw her face.

"Why, whatever's the matter, Miss Susan?" he exclaimed. "Have you been hurted?—or frightened? Why, you're white as a sheet. What's the matter, Miss?"

Cottle was really concerned. For the first time since infancy Susan was helped into the car.

She tried to smile. "It's all right, Cottle. I'm a bit tired, I think."

"Parcels in your way, Miss?" he asked solicitously, for the car was full of parcels.

Susan shook her head and sank back into her corner.

Cottle looked back at her several times during the journey home. She had not moved, and he was worried. Never before had he driven Miss Susan when she didn't clamour to sit in front.

II

At the top of the schoolroom stairs she met David. He was in the secret of Susan's adoration of Hesper, and of the stolen visit.

"Hullo, Sukey," he cried. "Did you see your charmer all right?"

"I shall never see her any more," she said slowly. "Hesper is dead."

David put his arm round her shoulders and leant his warm face against her cold one. "Poor old Sue," he said. "What rotten luck!"

Clasping each other, they stood there for a minute, then went together down the long passage to her bedroom door. David hugged her. "Would you like me to come in with you, or would you rather be alone a bit, old thing?"

Susan nodded.

He left her, and she went in, shutting the door behind her.

Hamish, offended at not being taken into town, had sought solace for his wounded feelings on Susan's bed. As she came in he sat up, cocked his ears and looked at her, bounced off the bed and rushed at her in welcome.

She caught him up in her arms and burst into tears.

III

That night, when she said her prayers, she added this petition: "When I'm grown up—if I grow up—let me not be stupid, let me not be afraid of people, and let me keep my Hesper in my heart for ever and ever. Amen."

Instead of jumping up to switch off the light, she remained on her knees long after she had ceased to pray.

She was thinking hard.

After all, what was the use of praying?

Who could be sure that there was any God who listened?

And even if there was, what good was He to have let Hesper die?

Every one, even at that footling little school, had liked Hesper. She was so funny and innocent somehow; so harmless and kind and loving. Why should Hesper die?

At last Susan rose from her knees, but she didn't get into bed. She turned off the light (Aunt Myrtle might go along the passage and see it shining under the door), crossed the room and pushed the casement window wider open.

The driving rain had ceased and the moon was shining: a big round moon that laid velvet-black shadows on the garden path, and lit up the starry blooms of tobacco plants intensely white and sharp amidst the foliage.

She could see the beginning of the Nuns' Walk, an arched mass dense and solid against the diaphanous darkness of the sky.

Never again would she walk hand in hand with Hesper in those green cloisters, to see the double cherry in her veil of white.

Never again would she wheel Hesper in the big barrow round by the kitchen garden and the potting-sheds.

Never again . . .

"Never" can be a very dreadful word at eleven years old.

It was cold at the open window, and Susan shivered, but she did not move.

Hamish, warm in his basket beside her bed, was puzzled and uncomfortable.

Why did she stand over there so still instead of hurtling into bed as though shot from a catapult?

He couldn't possibly settle off to sleep while she stood remote and aloof by that cold window. Besides, she hadn't said "good night" to him.

Reluctantly he dragged himself from beneath his enfolding rug and pattered across the room, and jumped up on her, pressing her body with insistent paws that almost hurt through her thin nightgown.

She stooped and gathered him up in her arms.

"You shall sleep in my bed to-night, Hamish," she said, "for to-morrow everything will be different."

BOOK II
1921
INTERPLAY

“And time remembered is grief forgotten,
And frosts are slain and flowers begotten,
And in green underwood and cover
Blossom by blossom and Spring begins.”

Atalanta in Calydon.

CHAPTER V

“**T**HERE!” Julia exclaimed, waving her hand towards the rows of books that formed a dado round the dove-grey walls. “You won’t find one Victorian amongst them.”

“Why is that so splendid?” Susan asked.

“It is splendid because it means emancipation from stuffy ideals and mental trappings and a million oughts and mustn’ts and don’ts and a hundred million musts. We’ve got right away from them, and cast them behind us.”

“Have we?” Susan asked doubtfully. “Are you sure?”

“I’m sure about myself absolutely. I’m not in the least sure about you; because you, Susan beloved, are still somewhat bourgeois . . . somewhat philistine.”

“Were the Philistines particularly hampered by oughts and mustn’ts and don’ts?” Susan asked innocently.

“When I call you a philistine I’m afraid I’m using a hackneyed phrase, loosely applied to a

certain type of mind. You're too content to jog along in the same old beaten track. You're not without quite serviceable brains. . . . You have plenty of character. . . ."

"I'm glad you allow me some qualities," Susan interrupted.

"Oh, you've plenty of *qualities*—but you are not receptive. You jib at new ideas. You're not in the movement."

"What do you mean, exactly, by 'not in the movement'?"

Susan's charming voice expressed no irritation, rather a humble desire for instruction; a praise-worthy mental attitude somewhat contradicted by the amusement in her bright eyes.

Her cousin Julia did not observe her eyes. Curled up at the opposite end of an immense black divan that faced the fire, she was intently watching her own admirable rings of smoke and answered the voice only, with high seriousness.

"Well, you know you really horrified me last night when you confessed before all those people that you had never even heard of Alfrey Stowe."

"I didn't 'confess.' I merely stated a fact. It's quite true, I never had. What is there so awful about it?"

"It's awful, Susan, because it places you . . ."

"Places me—where?"

"Among the impossible provincial crowd who

begin to talk about a book months after London has forgotten it."

"But I should have thought authors would like that sort of crowd—else their books would be dead as mutton directly London had done with 'em."

"I dare say authors do like them—in a way; but one doesn't want to be classed with them oneself."

"Do you know this wonderful Alfrey Stowe? The man, I mean, not his books."

Julia smiled: a superior, secret sort of smile. "I do. Rather well, as it happens. In fact, I think I may say he's one of my special young men."

"Oh!" Susan remarked, with understanding. "That's quite enough to account for your enthusiasm. You'd better lend it to me to read: of course, you've got it. I don't know when we shall belong to a library again, and if I was to buy a book just now, and father found out, he'd have a fit."

"If I do lend it to you—and I'm not at all sure that I ought to . . ."

"Why? Is it so very improper?"

"My dear Susan, in Art we don't consider propriety or impropriety; the words and all they stand for are dead and done with, thank heaven! So let them rest in peace. No—what I'm doubtful

about is this. He gave it to me himself—and wrote the dedicatory verses in it with his own hand.”

“Perhaps, then, I’d better not have it,” Susan said, rather nervously. “I dare say I can support existence without it till we belong to a library again. Father’s got the wind up about expenses just now and cuts off everything that he doesn’t care much about himself.”

“I think,” Julia said slowly, “I will trust you—but you must take tremendous care of it.”

“I will. I’ll read it at once and send it back by registered post.”

“I dare say some of it may be over your head . . . but I believe you’ll rather like it. Of course, he doesn’t pretend to write for your type; it doesn’t appeal to him.”

“How d’you know I shouldn’t appeal to him? He’s never seen me.”

Again Julia smiled her superior, secret sort of smile. “You’re a charming, pretty butterfly, my dear, where men are concerned,” she said tolerantly, “but Alfrey Stowe is not one to be contented by mere surface things. He looks deep into the heart of life. He’s a serious writer. He has no time for mere excrescences.”

“I’m bothered if anyone shall call me a mere excrescence,” Susan protested.

“I’m not referring to your way of life so much

as to your attitude of mind," Julia said. "All I want to impress upon you is, that you must judge Alfrey by quite a different standard from that of your officer boys."

"You don't mean to tell me he was a conchy?"

"Of course not. He joined up in 1914 like everybody else, but Gallipoli finished him. He was awfully ill; in hospital for about nine months; then in the Intelligence Department; and finally he was demobilized among the very first, because they wanted him so badly on the paper. He's assistant editor of *Orion*, you know."

"Perhaps I shall meet him next spring—after Christmas."

"Not very likely, unless with us. You move in different orbits—and I warn you, Susan, even if you do meet him he won't fall a victim. You're not a bit his style."

"It's more important he should be mine, since I've got to read his book. I'll never forgive you, Judy, if it's dull."

"You *will* take the greatest care of it?" Julia pleaded.

Susan promised by all her gods that the precious volume should never leave her hands for a minute.

She started to read in the taxi that took her to Wimbledon station, and, of course, she read the verses first. These she dismissed as piffle. While waiting for the train she read the book. In the

train she continued to read, and found that the book wasn't piffle. She became so absorbed that she almost forgot to change at Earl's Court. She seized suit-case and muff (a barrel muff into which no eight-and-sixpenny book could be inserted), tucked the book under her arm, and pushed through the crowd for her train. The platform was thronged; every carriage was packed, especially the firsts, and just as the train was starting she jumped into an already crowded corridor, where she sat on her suit-case till she reached King's Cross.

When she got her breath again she looked for her book, and it was gone.

It must have slipped from her arm while she was being jostled at Earl's Court.

She sat crouched on her suit-case, with bent head and furiously beating heart, thoroughly upset, perplexed, and miserable.

It was hopeless to attempt to recover it. No one ever found anything in these tempestuous times, and even honest folk were so dishonest about books and umbrellas. It wasn't as if Julia's full name and address were in it. "To Julia," then the verses on a half-sheet of note-paper, which she had pasted into the book. No address on that either.

"Careless fellow not to use stamped note-paper," Susan reflected.

Long before this somebody would have picked it up and be reading it in the train. What on earth would Julia say? Suppose she was really in love with this Alfrey Stowe—suppose she was going to marry him? She would be so upset; she would be hurt. And it was dreadful to hurt people. Julia might be a bit conceited and self-centred, she might imagine she had all the earth and fullness thereof—she *had* a good deal—but she was Susan's cousin, she had been kind, and it was a jolly house to stay in.

What was to be done?

Susan was nothing if not resourceful. By the time she reached King's Cross she had a plan of campaign all mapped out.

She fled to the cloak-room to leave her suitcase, and then to find out where she ought to apply for lost property.

She was cold, tired, and hungry (it was quite lunch-time), but she had shuffled the cards and meant to have another deal. Had it been her own book, she would not have given the matter a thought. Had it been any other book of Julia's, she would have done her best to replace it, and trusted to Julia's forgiveness.

But this Book!

Julia had looked so conscious. She had swanked so, and, "She said I wouldn't appeal to him. She little thought how soon I'd have to, and why."

A porter who admired slim ankles encased in tall boots went out of the station, against all rules, and secured an entering taxi.

She drove to *The Times* Book Club, paid a brief visit there, and then directed the driver to an address in a side street not far from Charing Cross.

On the way there Susan surveyed herself anxiously in the cracked mirror. It was a shabby taxi.

She pulled her hat more over her eyebrows and gazed fixedly at the reflected face that even the disfiguring crack could not render wholly unattractive.

Dark eyes; dark, finely marked eyebrows; warm, clear colour in the right places. Susan smiled at the face reflected in the cracked glass.

Yes; the face was clean, though the glass wasn't.

"I wonder what he'll say!" she pondered. "I do hope he's not greedy and already gone to lunch. I should be if I were he. Perhaps he's one of the industrious sort and has sandwiches in the office. I'm sure I hope he's had them. If he's too hungry he'll be disobliging. Suppose he isn't there at all! What if he has gone out of town? Oh, he couldn't be gone on a Wednesday!"

The taxi stopped outside a tall house in a fairly wide street.

There were several names emblazoned on the

wall just inside the open door. The high boots twinkled up the dusty staircase. The taxi-driver looked after them and grinned. The young lady had left a copy of *Orion* in the taxi. Well, he supposed, she didn't want it.

She went up and up until she reached a dingy door with "Orion Office" in large white letters. Beside it was another door marked "Enquiries." She tapped and opened it, finding herself in a small slip of a room with another door facing her marked "Private," a table covered with newspapers, and a chair on which sat a weedy young man whose gloomy, questioning gaze gradually changed to one of pleasurable interest.

"Is Mr. Alfrey Stowe in?" she asked. "I want to see him."

"Manuscripts or drawin's?" the weedy one demanded.

"Neither. I wish to see him upon urgent private affairs," Susan said firmly.

The weedy one hesitated. Still looking at her, he muttered, "I expect he's out. . . ." Then, suddenly, "What name?"

"Miss Collett," she said, "and make sure that he isn't out, please."

She smiled at him.

He promptly departed through the door marked "Private," carefully shutting the door behind him.

"Young lady to see you, sir," he announced to

a thin young man wearing rimless spectacles, who was sitting at a knee-hole table correcting proofs.

"How often have I told you, Negus, that I will see no young ladies in office hours?"

"She says her name's Colley."

"Miss Colley—never heard of the lady. Say I'm gone out."

"She says she's not come about copy, sir," Negus persisted. "She wants to see you on urgent private affairs. That's what she said, and would take no denial."

"Tell her I'm out," and down went his head over the proofs again.

"She's a nice-lookin' young lady," Negus murmured, still hovering.

"Negus!" Stowe said sternly, without raising his head, "I gave you a message."

"I should see her if I was you, sir," Negus muttered, as he edged towards the door.

"What the dickens do you mean?" Stowe asked, looking up. "Is she a friend of yours?"

"Never saw her till a minute ago, sir; but I really think . . ."

"What do you really think?"

"That I'd see her if I was you, sir."

Stowe continued to look at Negus, and laughed.

"Shall I say you could see her in half an hour, sir?"

"Show her in, man. She's probably listening to every word we say."

Negus departed as though shot from a catapult, and just then the sun came out from its shrouding, snowy clouds and showed how dusty the table was.

Susan came through the door, closing it behind her as carefully as Negus.

She approached the knee-hole table and stood there, hesitating. She also blushed and dimpled.

He had risen as she came in.

"You wish to see me, I believe?"

His voice was formal and not encouraging. Julia Mainwaring was right: tall boots, bewitching dimples, bright eyes, left him comparatively unmoved.

"I think you know Miss Julia Mainwaring?" she began timidly, and stopped.

"Ah . . . er . . . certainly . . . of course. Did she send you to me?"

"Oh, no; at least . . ." She clasped her hands and the dimples disappeared as she realized the dreary waste of explanation that lay before her. She, who could never explain anything, not even the way she did her hair.

"Pray sit down," he said politely.

She sat down. He sat down. One on each side of the dusty knee-hole table.

"You were saying . . ." he began encouragingly.

"You remember that you once gave Julia a novel—your novel, *A Divided Interest*?"

"Did I?" he said vaguely. "I dare say I did, but I don't remember."

"But you *must* remember," she exclaimed, much distressed. "You must remember—that's what I've come for."

"What you've come for?" he repeated, hopelessly puzzled.

"You wrote a poem in it."

"Perhaps I did. One does foolish things like that. But what of it?"

"I want you to do it again," she said earnestly, suddenly producing a book, "in here. Just the same poem, 'To Julia,' like the other one. Exactly the same. Please do, and it will get me out of such an awful scrape. I brought it all the way here on purpose. Oh, please do!—on a plain half-sheet of paper . . ."

She leant across the table, holding out the book to him. He took the book, saying, "But why? I don't understand. You really must explain . . . Besides . . . I fear . . ."

"Please don't refuse," she pleaded, putting her elbows down in a sea of papers and leaning her firm chin on her clasped hands. "If you don't write it over again, I don't know what I shall do. I've come all this way, miles and miles, and I've had no lunch, and they'll wonder what has become

of me, but I hope they'll think I have chosen a later train. Oh, please hurry up and do it!"

Her eyes were pleading and the table was not particularly wide.

He was thoroughly mystified, but he said gently: "If you could tell me why you ask me to do it . . . I'll try, though I fear it's impossible. Surely Miss Mainwaring can't want two copies of my book?"

"It isn't Miss Mainwaring. She knows nothing about it. It's me . . ."

"And you want me to autograph it. . . . Oh, certainly." And he took up his pen.

"Stop!" she cried. "I don't want the book myself . . . though I like it most awfully—it's most interesting—I want it for her, because I've done a perfectly awful thing. I've lost her copy at Earl's Court in the crowd—there was an awful crowd. It was sneaked away from me somehow. I can't think how it escaped. And she'll never forgive me. And I'm fond of her, and I promised to be so careful. . . ."

He was silent. Bright eyes might leave him unmoved. Dimples might scintillate without stirring his pulses a single beat, but a beautiful speaking voice gave him exquisite pleasure. Susan's voice was full and soft and seductive. He wanted her to go on talking . . . any nonsense . . . it didn't matter. . . .

"Can't you understand?" she cried, exasperated by his silence. "No other copy could be the same to her if it hasn't got the poetry. You surely must remember it if you made it up."

"But I can't, really. I don't remember writing any verses. I dare say I did; but I have no recollection of it."

"What you have done once," she said reproachfully, "you can do again. Besides, you must have done it a great deal oftener than once, if you can forget it so utterly. I'm rather shocked. It was a most . . . effusive poem."

Silence again while he thought, "I wish she'd go on talking," and Susan tried with all her might to "will" him to remember the verses. "I don't believe you're trying," she said sternly.

"I am—I will—but I'm certain I can't remember those verses. I've no doubt I could write some new ones—but that wouldn't do, unless she has forgotten the others. Do you think she has forgotten the others?"

"I fear not," she said sadly. "She has an awfully good memory for quotations and things. *I've* read your book, you know—at least, a good bit of it, when it went and got lost. I liked it if only you wouldn't use quite such long words."

"It's a bad habit that I must try to mend."

"Do," she said. "Write a nice easy book for me."

"I will," he said.

"But, first, do that poem. Think!"

"Do you happen to remember any of it?" he asked despairingly, as he weighed the book nervously in his hand.

Susan knitted her delicate eyebrows in strained concentration. "There was something about 'She took me by enchanted ways.' Do you think ways are very enchanted in Wimbledon? Of course, the Mainwarings' grounds are pretty, but . . ."

"Good heavens, no! I can't have meant Wimbledon. Go on," Alfrey encouraged, "' . . . enchanted ways'—and then?"

"I've got it!" she cried. "'Through sunlit something and shadowy wood.'"

"Do you happen to remember if the lines rhymed?"

"Not much, I don't think," Susan said candidly. "Yet it wasn't exactly blank verse . . . I mean the kind that doesn't rhyme at all," she explained kindly.

"I give it up!" he cried. "I can't remember anything whatever about it."

"You ought to Pelmanize," she said reprov-
ingly.

"Was there something about 'a solitude'?" he asked.

"Yes, yes! You're getting warm. I remember it myself: 'Her presence filled with faery light

that solitude.' Now, surely you can reconstruct three little verses from all that. And I know 'paradise' came in. Go on: write *something*. Think a little more, and it will all come back."

He sighed deeply and took up his pen.

She watched him with breathless interest. Scrape, scrape went the pen.

His head was bent over the paper and she found herself noting regretfully that his hair was going grey and getting very thin on the top.

"There!" he said presently. "That's as near as I can get. Do you think it'll do?" And he handed the scrawl to her.

She studied it eagerly. "It's very illegible," she said dubiously. "You wrote better that other time—but perhaps it will pass. Anyway, I'll try it on. Now stick it in the book, please. And you won't give me away if she doesn't notice, will you?"

"You promise not to give *me* away?"

"Is it likely?" she asked. "I'm ever so much obliged. I suppose writing verses comes as easy to you as cleaning taps to me?"

"Both need considerable polishing. Have you been cleaning taps long?"

"Four years and two months exactly. How long have you been making poetry?"

"On and off, about fifteen . . . but you can't call it poetry."

"Blank, I suppose?"

"Often very blank."

"Now," she said, "just one more favour. A bit of brown paper and a piece of string, and take the paper cover off; hers hadn't that."

"Negus will do that for you," he said. "But don't you want to finish it?" he asked, just a little wistfully.

"I'll finish it when I get to Hatfield; I'm staying with an aunt. I won't run any more risks on the journey. I'll tie it to my wrist. Even if I lose my suit-case I'll have it safe. Then the minute I've heard from the lost property office that her copy isn't there—and I know it won't be—I'll send this one by registered post."

He struck a handbell on the table. Negus appeared and took the book away to wrap it up.

"Did I hear you say you'd had no lunch?" he asked. "I haven't either, so perhaps we might have it together."

"That," Susan said, "would be very agreeable. I'm simply starving."

"What do you say to the Savoy? It's quite near, and the view over the river is jolly."

"There were bits of that book marked in pencil at the sides," she said thoughtfully. "Do you think it will matter? Or should I put in a few pencil lines, just in case?"

"Do you remember what passages were marked?"

“Good gracious, no! How can you expect me to remember that, when you don’t remember poetry that you made up yourself?”

“Then I should leave it,” he said. “You see, she might wonder . . .”

“It strikes me she may wonder considerably as it is. My only hope is that she won’t read it again the minute it comes back. Anyway, I’ll risk it, and probably she’d rather have the wrong verses than none.”

CHAPTER VI

I

THEY were so late that they had no difficulty in finding a table: one of the coveted tables set in a window overlooking the river.

Susan surveyed the room with pleased, interested eyes. "Be sure and tell me," she said, "if anyone interesting is here, anyone I ought to recognize and don't. I mean Actors or Authors or Artists—funny how they all begin with 'A'—I've been out of London so long that I've never seen anybody except in the *Tatler*, and people look different there."

"It would be charitable to suppose so. What did they do with you, for instance?"

"Not much, only a little inset thing when I was working in my aunt's hospital. I'm quite unimportant, you see, and I wasn't even in London, where girls had much more fun. But I've seen your portrait looking solemn and literary, with a book so far off you couldn't possibly read it, even with those strong spectacles."

"The spectacles are both a refuge and a scourge.

You, for instance, I am quite sure, put all spectacle-wearing people into a compartment of your mind quite separated from that where the unspectacled play about."

"I wonder," she said, "I wonder if I do."

"I'm sure that you do, and it is so unfair," and the grey eyes behind the spectacles searched her face rather wistfully.

Susan coloured. "I can't see why people who wear spectacles should be allowed to stare harder than people who don't," she said. "Please look round the room and see if there are any other well-known folks besides ourselves."

"The man sitting up at that table near the door is Fred Gresson, whose play, 'Windlestraws,' has been running for nearly a year."

"And the lady in the orange hat . . .?"

". . . is his wife."

"Wives of great men all remind us," she misquoted softly.

"What? Were you brought up on Longfellow too?" he asked, "and earnestness and reality and the whole outfit?"

"I was brought up on everything solid and wholesome and provincial. That's why Julia grieves over me. But I hope to improve. Are you a real Londoner?"

"Me! Oh dear no. Till I went to Cambridge I lived in a little country town in Wiltshire."

"Wiltshire! Why, that's my county too, near Frampton Massey."

"And Frampton Massey's my town. And you must be a Miss Collett. Negus announced you as 'Miss Colley,' and that muddled me, but all the time I've had the feeling that I'd seen you somewhere long ago and far away. Do you never go there now?"

They were staring at each other across the little table, and Susan's dark, delicately marked eyebrows were drawn together in a puzzled frown, as if she were trying to remember something. *She* was staring now, staring hard and ruthlessly, and it was his turn to blush.

"I haven't been there since 1916," she said slowly, "and before that only in the holidays. Father let the Manor to rich Belgians during the war, and when the war ended he let it to rich profiteer people from near Coventry. They've taken it for fifteen years, and pay a good rent, otherwise I don't know what we should have done, for everything else seems to have stopped paying. He can't sell it, because it's entailed, but these people—Mabbitt's their name—seem to like it, and they're awfully good tenants. So they may go on living there indefinitely. I don't suppose any of us can ever afford to live there again. . . . Do you still go down sometimes to the dear old place?"

"As often as I can. My mother lives there, and Frampton Massey has a never-failing charm for me. Don't you find that you want to go back?"

"Of course I want to go back . . . but it's sad too. Hardly any of the people in the places round about can afford to live in them . . . and I miss David so—my eldest brother. He was more like grandfather than any of us—so kind and charming. He was killed three weeks after war broke out . . . and father . . . But why should I bother you with family histories? Only it is odd that we both should come from that dear little old place. Please don't tell Julia—at least, not yet. We're not supposed to have met, you know."

"How soon am I likely to meet you again with Miss Mainwaring?"

"We're pretty sure to meet there sooner or later, if you go there often . . . but don't you think . . . considering everything . . . that book I lost . . . the verses . . . that it would be better if it seemed that we hadn't actually met till Julia introduces us. . . . It would save such a lot of questions and explanations?"

As Susan made this rather faltering speech she wasn't looking at him, but looked down at her bread, which she was nervously crumbling. And again he surrendered to the charm of her voice.

If she would only go on talking in that musical, companionable voice——

Yes: her eyelashes were long and black—but a great many girls had long black eyelashes; and her mouth, the full red lips parted in eager question, was a good-tempered, generous mouth. And the colour in her cheeks was fresh and fluctuating, while her chin and neck were privet-white . . . but most pretty girls looked that sort of colour to a very short-sighted young man.

She had ceased to talk and the silence that followed her last words filled her with misgiving.

“Don’t you agree with me?” She asked anxiously.

“Of course, of course—quite——”

“You don’t think it horrid and underhand?”

“Think what horrid and underhand?”

“I’m afraid you haven’t been listening.”

“Indeed I have. I could listen to you all day.”

Her look of astonishment restored him to his sense.

“I beg your pardon,” he said. “There’s rather a noise. . . . Would you mind repeating what you said just now?”

“Now I,” she said reproachfully, “was just thinking how quiet it is here compared to most restaurants. Why, we’re the very last people having lunch! We *must* go and let the poor things

tidy up. People will be coming to tea if we're not quick. Tie the parcel to my wrist, please, and then I must fly in a taxi to King's Cross. I know there's a train soon after four."

II

He paid the bill in a sort of dream. He put her in a taxi and saw her drive away, and then remembered that he had never asked for her address, nor how soon she was coming back to stay with Julia Mainwaring. And at the thought of Julia Mainwaring—he had got back to his office by this time—he lost himself in such a labyrinth of conjecture that he forgot Susan altogether, and was left blinking in the stream of light his meeting with her had thrown upon his, hitherto, quite undefined relation to Julia.

He had not sent Julia a copy of *A Divided Interest* when his own came from the publisher, because he felt that to do so seemed to take for granted an intimacy that he, being modest though young, could not feel existed.

Therefore she must have bought the book, and herself have written the verses she showed to Susan.

Why?

He turned hot and cold and tremulous as a possible reason suggested itself.

Could it be that Julia, ultra-modern and there-

fore, presumably, quite without sentiment; that Julia, the fashionable, sought-after, spoilt only daughter of Sir Godfrey Mainwaring, the great nerve specialist, wanted something more from him than a mere literary friendship?

That because he had been distant and decorous and timid in all his intercourse with her, she had written the verses herself to give herself secret comfort?

What a poignantly intriguing situation!

All the novelist in him was roused to interest.

It had never occurred to him that he might fall in love with Julia.

He was not even sure that he really admired her. He admired certain things about her and rather deprecated others.

She attracted him. He liked being with her, and he liked the pleasant and influential people he met at Woodlands. People who had been kind and friendly when he had but few friends in London.

But love was such a big thing.

It asked so much and surrendered so much.

He took refuge behind his spectacles.

Julia couldn't possibly have fallen in love with him. It was oafish and ridiculous even to imagine such a thing.

Yet—if she wasn't in love with him, why had she written those verses to herself?

It was the sort of thing *he* might do.

A pathetic, imaginative piece of foolishness that he understood perfectly. That filled him with tenderness towards Julia.

Yes; he understood her writing them. But what he did not understand was, that, having written them, she should show them to any human creature.

Alfrey was curiously inarticulate except on paper. His loves were few and faithful, his admirations many and varied. He believed implicitly in his own brains and the fruit of those brains; but his work was a thing apart—outside and above himself. About Alfrey Stowe, the man, he was extremely diffident, knowing him to be a creature of small allurements. Shy, reserved, plain, and insignificant in person.

That was Alfrey Stowe, the man.

Of Alfrey Stowe, the writer, he believed all things and hoped all things.

If Julia had fallen in love with *that* Alfrey Stowe, it was quite comprehensible . . . but did he want her to fall in love with *that* Alfrey Stowe?

And suddenly cutting across all this tangle of perplexities, pleasant and exciting enough in their way, he heard a sweet companionable voice saying, "Write a nice easy book for me."

Bother the girl!

If she hadn't so heedlessly lost Julia's copy of

A Divided Interest, he would never have known anything about the verses.

Yet he was glad to know . . . and again a wave of tenderness towards Julia submerged every other feeling for two minutes, and then—— Why hadn't all women got delightful voices?

Curious to meet that Collett girl in such a fashion. Curious that she should come to him to beg a favour. "Those proud Colletts," his mother had called them long ago—but for some years past their name had dropped out of Frampton Massey gossip. Wasn't there something about General Collett towards the end of the war? He couldn't remember exactly what . . . wasn't he recalled only a short time before the Armistice?—and people said it had broken his heart and ruined his temper. The Frampton Massey people had liked the youngsters, he was sure of that. Wasn't there something, too, about this very Susan and his little sister? The little sister who was only a faint though fragrant memory to him now. So much had happened since she died. Yet the phrase "those proud Colletts" was somehow associated with his little sister; though how and why he could not remember. Was she proud? he wondered. She carried her head high, but he thought "joyous" described her rather than proud; and her voice was the friendliest voice in the world.

What an actress she would have made! And he laughed because he was absolutely certain Susan couldn't act at all.

Bother the girl!

She had wasted his afternoon, and now she bid fair to spoil his evening.

Suppose Miss Mainwaring found out about those verses. . . . Good heavens!

He tried to settle down to work, but found himself thinking about Susan. She was undoubtedly ignorant, probably had received next to no education, and was entirely lacking in appreciation or even knowledge of such new stars as shone in the firmament of the Arts.

A casual, tiresome, upsetting girl. Yet he'd rather like to meet her again . . . and hoped it might be soon.

III

It took so long to collect her suit-case at King's Cross that Susan only just managed to catch her train.

Once she was safely wedged into a crowded third-class carriage, she started thinking steadily and hard.

The long arm of coincidence was indeed stretched out, and the clutch of circumstance held her in a firm grip.

An almost forgotten summer came back to her vivid and clear. Picture after picture passed before her mind. Each carrying with it experiences none the less poignant because they had been overlaid by a multitude of other experiences; covered up and pressed to the bottom of the soul archives, but there carefully preserved uncrushed and unfaded.

Again she saw the little day school at Frampton Massey, where she had been sent for one term because her governess had fallen ill and Aunt Myrtle wanted to go away. A common little school it was. She realized that now. But she had always seen it through a sort of golden haze because of one girl there whom she had dearly loved, little Hesper Stowe. And time that had ruthlessly rent the glamour surrounding so many childish admirations had only added a sort of tender halo to the remembrance of her little friend.

And this young man, this Alfrey Stowe, with whom she had just been lunching, must be Hesper's brother. She remembered hazily that there was a brother much older than Hesper, and clever, they said. And now he wrote much-talked-of novels, and Julia was proud of knowing him. Julia, whose visiting list was carefully revised and decreased every time Uncle Godfrey attended a new Royalty. Julia, who, while professing almost Bolshevist

views as regarded politics, was careful to sift her friends' social possibilities through a very fine mesh indeed.

Did he remember his little sister? Susan wondered. Had he been fond of her? Had he known the child's love for Susan and her grief when they were parted? Did he blame her? If he thought about it at all, did he think she was a willing thrall to the tyranny of caste that had compelled her? Again Susan thrilled with futile rebellion . . . and it was all so long ago. Perhaps he didn't even remember Hesper had known her. Was he fond of his mother? Susan hoped so. Hesper had been devoted to her mother. . . .

Women were reaching bundles down from the racks. They had reached Hatfield.

IV

Miss Myrtle Collett had excellent health, a handsome person, and, what most people in these hard times would consider, quite adequate means.

Moreover, her life was brightened by the possession of a grievance which could, on occasion, be inflated into a dudgeon.

This grievance was that the manor-house at Aylberne should be let while she had not yet been able to find the house she wished to settle down in.

Not that she dreamt of living in a hotel or rooms. Since the war she had taken a furnished house wherever she happened to want to live. But she complained that it really did seem hard that, whereas during the many years she had been mistress of her father's house she had looked after four noisy young Colletts in the holidays while their parents were in India, now that the war was over, and once more she had time to pay visits, General Collett should have let the Manor for a term of years and joined his family in a nomadic existence in service flats or residential hotels. A sort of life much more calculated to demand hospitality than to offer it.

Now Miss Collett herself was hospitable. She contrived to have and keep good servants when other people had none, and in any house she rented you might be sure that the beds were comfortable, the house well warmed, and the cooking excellent. Therefore, just as in the old days the young Colletts had made the Manor their headquarters, so now, when any of them were at a loose end, they always descended upon Aunt Myrtle, and Susan was putting in three days between two visits.

"I expected you for luncheon," Aunt Myrtle said reproachfully, as they were having tea. "You said you were coming in the morning, although, as usual, you were quite indefinite as to train;

so of course I waited until half-past one, and now you've kept me waiting twenty minutes for tea. What delayed you?"

"I'm sorry, Aunt Myrtle, it was thoroughly tiresome of me, but I lost a parcel and had to make inquiries at the lost property office."

"Quite useless, I imagine. No one ever gets anything back nowadays . . . too many dishonest people about. What was in the parcel?"

Susan hesitated. Aunt Myrtle was inquisitive and had an amazingly good memory for things that other people hoped she might forget.

"Just a book, Aunt Myrtle."

"A book? What sort of book?"

"A novel."

"Really, you are very mysterious. Is there any reason why its name should be withheld?"

"None whatever," Susan answered boldly. "It was called *The Crooked Way*."

"*The Crooked Way*," Aunt Myrtle repeated. "I haven't read any reviews of that; and it doesn't sound at all a desirable subject. Perhaps it's just as well you lost it."

"Perhaps it is," Susan agreed meekly.

"Had you read any of it?"

"Not much."

"One doesn't usually carry a book one is reading in a paper parcel—and that reminds me—I noticed when you came in that you were carrying a parcel

that looked like a book. Did you find it again, after all?"

"No, Aunt Myrtle, not yet. They're making inquiries."

"Then what was the book in that parcel?"

"Another novel that I bought."

"Do you think you ought to spend money on silly novels just now, when your father is so pressed for money he can't live in the house of his ancestors and has to let it? You are very thoughtless. Because your godmother is kind enough to give you a handsome dress allowance, that is no reason why you should fritter it away on rubbishy novels that you could quite well obtain from the circulating library—if you must waste time reading them. You might remember your brothers if you have any money to spare. We all have to practice economy just now, so as to help others. . . ."

"Yes, Aunt Myrtle, I know."

"And it seems unfair," Aunt Myrtle continued, "that all the hardships should fall on older people, while the young merely amuse themselves."

"Quite," Susan agreed briefly, and produced her cigarette-case. "May I smoke? Do you mind?"

"I do mind. And I must ask you not to smoke in my drawing-room. I have to put up with it when your father or your brothers visit me, but I see no reason why I should encourage you in what

I take leave to consider an unfeminine and unpleasant habit."

Susan put her cigarette-case back in her pocket with a sigh of relief, secretly blessing the unfeminine and unpleasant habit that had, for the moment, diverted her aunt's attention from the parcel that looked like a book.

She decided that she would give the railway company three days. If by that time Julia's copy of *A Divided Interest* was not found, she must send the one with Alfrey Stowe's new verses in it.

She tried hard to allay her qualms of conscience by the reflection that one couldn't call it a forgery, as he had rewritten the verses himself.

She did *hope* they were the same, but she was doubtful. He had seemed so vague.

Were all authors like that? she wondered.

How angry Aunt Myrtle would be if she knew that lunch with the particular young man had delayed her. Aunt Myrtle was such a dear old die-hard. Even the war had not shaken her firm belief that "the rich man in his castle, the poor man at his gate," was a state of things divinely ordained. Whereas just then it was more often the rich man in the poor man's castle that he couldn't afford to live in; while Alfrey Stowe (whose little sister, Hesper, Susan had been forbidden to know) was courted by Julia, who was,

in her way, as great a snob as Aunt Myrtle.

“Anyway,” Susan reflected, “all the aunts in Europe shan’t stop me knowing Hesper’s brother—especially if he’s going to marry Julia. I like him. He’s queer and ugly and rather prim, but I believe he’s a good sort. I do hope he’ll play the game when I meet him at Woodlands.”

CHAPTER VII

I

A WEEK later Alfrey, taking a short cut through one of the streets off Fleet Street, came upon a crowd of poor children in brown overalls and rush hats. Very small girls, who were being shepherded into a building by two ladies. One was a little, bustling woman in the uniform of the Girl Guides; the other, much taller, in mufti.

He didn't particularly notice any of them beyond the fact that they took up all the pavement, and he was driven into the road.

When he had passed them he heard somebody say, "Gently does it. Don't crowd so. Mind the door . . . that's better. Good children." And he turned to find they had all vanished up the steps and through a pseudo-Gothic doorway.

He stood where he was in the comparatively quiet street; for the voice he had heard was the voice of Susan Collett.

The sweet, companionable voice that had haunted

him ever since she came to his office on that absurd errand about the verses.

He had not been to Woodlands since.

He had not met Julia anywhere.

He was still ignorant as to what had happened about the book.

Carefully noting the hall, he went on to his appointment, and came back the same way some three-quarters of an hour later.

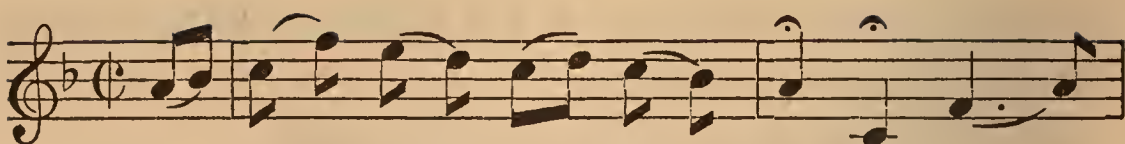
He mounted the steps, found the door was only latched, and passed into a dark ante-lobby with a short passage at one side of it.

Cheerful sounds of children singing came from a room at the end of the passage where the door was open far enough for him to see in.

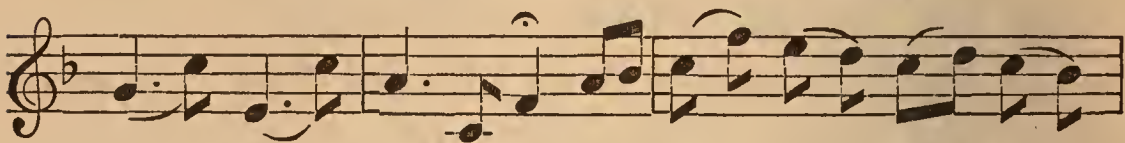
Some thirty little girls were ranged in a ring, and in the middle of them Susan Collett was standing. "Once again and a bit faster," she said, conducting with her hand, and the Brownies sang in unison—

"Once I got into a boat,
Such a pretty little boat,
Just as the day was dornin',
And I took a little oar
And I rowed out from the shore,
So very, very early in the mornin'."

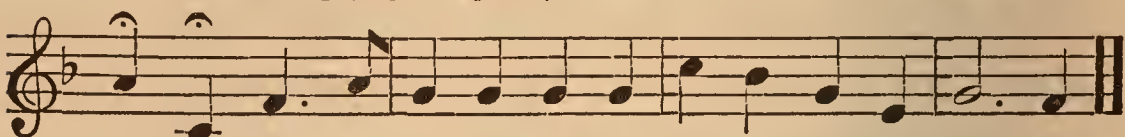
Then they started running round with skipping, tripping steps while they chanted—



And all the lit - tle waves had their night - caps on,



Night-caps, white caps, night-caps on, And all the lit - tle waves had their



night-caps on, So ver - y, ver - y ear - ly in the morn - in'.

“And all the little wives had their night-caps on,
Night-caps, white caps, night-caps on,
And all the little wives had their night-caps on,
So very, very early in the mornin’.”

Alfrey had a sudden vision of hundreds of little wives wearing night-caps in hundreds of little beds, and wondered what on earth it was all about.

There were more verses which they sang with the greatest enthusiasm, and each one ended with the tripping, skipping measure and the assurance that

“And all the little wives had their night-caps on,
Night-caps, white caps, night-caps on,
And all the little wives had their night-caps on,
So very, very early in the mornin’.”

Till it dawned upon him that the wives in question were waves.

Then, under Susan's leadership, they all went to the seaside. They climbed into the railway carriage. They sat closely packed. They had their first glimpse of the sea through the window amidst the greatest excitement. They descended from the railway carriage and were marshalled two by two upon the platform. Then they rushed to the beach and stood in rows, taking deep breaths and inhaling the ozone.

They paddled; and finally they bathed and had a swimming lesson, lying flat on their tummies and using their arms and legs as directed with immense enthusiasm. A truly enchanting expedition.

It was cold in that bare hall in the dark December afternoon illumined by two or three unshaded electric lights, but the Brownies were warm enough with their various exercises. Nevertheless, they panted and shivered most realistically while they dried themselves after their swim, and were so eager and earnest and convinced over it all, that Alfrey felt almost as if he'd been to the seaside himself.

Nobody noticed him. Nobody either asked him his business or drove him away, and he calmly sat down on a narrow ledge that was fixed on each side of the passage, to watch the rest of the show and to wait till they should finish.

There was something both valorous and pathetic

about these keen-faced, shrill-voiced London children: evidently, most of them, very poor. So many light feet were handicapped by broken shoes or badly overtrodden boots, several sizes too large. The few who possessed sand-shoes seemed so well shod in comparison, and three little girls in whole stockings looked almost pluto-cratic.

They were happy, biddable on the whole, and intensely earnest. After the seaside game they did some mysterious poojah round a huge mushroom-shaped object which was evidently their totem, and finally collected their rush hats and departed with much noise and chatter.

They noted Alfrey soon enough, and he heard one child say to another: "What d'you suppose he's witin' for?"

"'E's 'er boy most likely."

"Oo's boy?"

"Why, 'ers as takes the singin'; Brown Owl's got a 'usban', stupid."

"'E might be 'er 'usban'."

"Note 'e. 'Usband's don't go witin' abaht outside. They marches in as bold as brass. . . ."

He followed the Brownies out into the street and waited there while Susan and her friend collected music, shut the piano, and turned off lights.

Meanwhile quite a crowd of grown-up people

came out from some other meeting in the building, and he was afraid he might lose Susan. It had got so dark. But presently she and Brown Owl came out, and he heard Brown Owl say: "Well, good-bye, and thank you for helping. Try and turn up next Saturday, mind. We go different ways now. I've got to catch my train at St. Paul's."

"Miss Collett, may I speak to you for a minute?"

Susan started violently as Alfrey appeared at her side. "I was passing and saw you go into that hall, and on my way back I looked in to watch the show and wait for you. What about some tea?"

"I'm dying for some tea," Susan said, "but I won't have it under false pretences. If you think I can tell you anything about the lost book and Julia—I can't; for I only registered it back to her this morning before I came up to town. I waited, because I did hope so that they'd find it. I even wrote to Scotland Yard—but nothing doing—so I took the plunge."

"Did you—er—finish it?"

"I did."

"And you still think the style obscure?"

"I'm afraid I'm no judge of style," Susan answered primly, "so my opinion would be worth nothing."

Later, as they were having tea at Stuart's, she said: "Now tell me, what did you think of the Brownies?"

"I'm afraid I'm no judge of Brownies, so my opinion would be worth nothing."

"Don't be tiresome. . . . Tell me, didn't you, honestly, think they were rather sweet . . . and pathetic?"

"And shrill and rather grubby," Alfrey added. "Are you a guide yourself?"

"Not yet, because we're always moving, but I help when I can, for they're rather short-handed just now. Mrs. Tracey, that's Brown Owl, works so hard. It's a very poor section. Did you notice their sad little feet?"

"Can't the Guide Authorities provide shoes for them to play in? Is it forbidden?"

"Oh, I don't suppose it would be forbidden, but where's the money to come from? Mrs. Tracey herself gave them their hats and most of their overalls, but very often quite a lot of them can't bring their pennies."

"I believe," he said diffidently, "I could get the money for those shoes."

"You could? How?"

"Well, if you had no objection to my writing a little article about what I saw this afternoon."

"You mean some paper would pay for it? Really pay for it?"

"I believe so."

"And will you?"

"Certainly, if you'd like it."

"But of course I'd like it. . . . You're *sure* they'll pay for it?"

"I think I may say I'm pretty sure."

"How much will they pay, do you think? As much as five pounds? It would take every penny of that to get enough sand-shoes—things are so dear still. Oh, it would be lovely of you. Will you do it at once—to-night?"

"I'll try to do it to-night."

"And when will you know how much they'll pay for it?"

"Quite soon, I should think."

"Could you let us have the money before Christmas?"

"I think so, certainly."

"Will you write down Mrs. Tracey's address and send it to her earmarked 'Sand-shoes for the Brownies'?"

"Mayn't I send the cheque to you?"

"Oh, no, much better send it to Mrs. Tracey direct."

He produced a fountain-pen and a notebook and duly inscribed Mrs. Tracey's address, taking care this time to secure Susan's as well. This accomplished, Susan rose, enjoining him to go home at once, "and mind you write that article.

Don't waste a minute. I'll walk down Piccadilly and be there directly. I'm with another aunt in Wilton Crescent till Monday."

"Mayn't I walk back with you?"

"Certainly not. It would be a dreadful waste of time. Please go away at once and write about the Brownies . . . you're quite sure they'll pay for it? But of course—you've got a paper yourself, haven't you?"

"I shan't put it in *Orion*. I think I could get more for it somewhere else."

"It seems too wonderful—don't lose a minute. I *am* glad you happened to see them."

II

On his way back to his chambers in the Temple, Alfrey set his teeth and muttered: "I'll show them. 'Those proud Colletts' indeed!"

It was true that there didn't seem much pride about Susan that he could discover, but her ignorance was deplorable.

How dare she keep asking in that sweet voice of hers if he was sure they'd pay for what he wrote? As if he were some wretched penny-a-liner. Did she never read reviews?

Confound her impudence!

How different from her Cousin Julia, who understood and appreciated his work with such

delicate discrimination. Who, if she ever ventured to criticize, was always helpful and psychologically right.

Bother Susan Collett and her Brownies—but he was glad of the opportunity to put her under an obligation.

He wasn't a bit fond of children even when they were clean and well groomed, deeming them quite unworthy of consideration by any serious novelist who wrote about Life. There was a lot of mawkish, sentimental nonsense talked and written about children—it was in the air—and the last thing he desired was to be in any way associated with the Group—if it were a Group—that specialized in Infancy.

Yet he had rather liked the Brownies of this afternoon. In spite of the tinkly piano; in spite of the dusty smell; in spite of the scorn and suspicion of anything that savoured of moral uplift which he shared with most young men who had survived the war, he had liked the Brownies.

The land of Make-Believe had always possessed immense attraction for him; and there could be no question that it was jolly and enlivening for those little girls to go once a week to a Magic Place where there occurred delightful adventures far removed from their daily experience.

Whatever the didactic teaching of the Guides might be, "all the little wives with their night-caps on" was delicious nonsense.

He'd write that article. He'd do it from a new view-point with only enough sentiment in it to suit the Christmas season. *The Times* should print it, and he'd send her *The Times*.

Probably she never looked at a paper except to read about the latest play or the latest fashions.

Well, she should read his article anyhow.

He'd see to that.

Ungracious girl! not to say anything about his book. Probably she was not sufficiently interested to finish it.

But common politeness should have made her say something.

Those proud Colletts!

He'd humble the pride of one of them. Before he'd done with her she should be grateful . . . grateful . . . humble . . . night-caps on . . .

Here he bumped violently into an indignant old gentleman coming in the opposite direction; for, unconsciously, Alfrey had quickened his steps in a crowded street to the tune of "All the little wives had their night-caps on."

III

Susan, too, went down Piccadilly to the tune of "Night-caps, white caps, night-caps on." She

was pleased and excited at the accidental meeting that was to result in such unexpected good fortune for the Brownies.

How pleased Aunt Em would be. Aunt Em, her mother's only sister; that kind, rich, childless godmother who loved her, spoiled her, and gave her the allowance which was definitely dedicated to clothes.

When, goodness! she suddenly remembered that as yet she was supposed never even to have seen Alfrey Stowe. She mustn't tell Aunt Em or anyone, and she was bursting with the desire to broadcast this important news . . . and (she confessed it to herself) to crow over Julia, who was always chilly and superior when Guides or Women Institutes were mentioned, while Aunt Em was an enthusiastic supporter of all such movements. If Aunt Em knew that this Mr. Stowe had done such a kind thing as that, she'd ask him to all her parties, and she gave such nice parties. It seemed mean to do him out of such friendly hospitality, and yet she must . . .

Susan sighed; but cheered up as she reflected that, unless he had grossly overestimated the value of his writing, the Brownies would get their shoes.

IV

When Susan got back to Wilton Crescent, she went straight to her aunt's drawing-room. Big and L-shaped, it seemed full of relations. Her own father and mother, newly arrived from Bath, to stay over Sunday on their way to Aunt Myrtle's for Christmas. A whole family of cousins from Wiltshire. Her uncle, Sir Godfrey Mainwaring; and, sitting on the high fender warming her hands, Julia, surrounded by three young men whom Susan didn't know. Julia, looking particularly slim and elegant in grey with blue fox furs.

Susan dutifully embraced her father and mother, shook hands with the cousins, was kissed by Sir Godfrey, and approached the hearthrug rather breathless, with a dreadful thumping in her ears.

Suppose Julia went for her about the book, before all these people—what could she say?

And Julia was far from reticent. But Julia only turned to her, saying quite amiably: "Hullo, Susan! How late you are. Daddie and I looked in to ask you all to come out to Woodlands to-morrow afternoon. We've got Gobboni, the 'cello man, coming, and he'll play. Robinoff's coming too, and will sing. But Aunt Em says she's got people coming here especially to meet Uncle Fred and Aunt Jo—which is a bore. I'm just back from a ball at Newbury. Daddie met

me at Paddington and we drove straight here.”

Susan caught at her vanishing self-control and held it. Julia hadn't seen the book yet then.

And with all those people coming to-morrow she might be too busy to examine it, even if she did open the parcel. Susan breathed freely again.

Julia let loose an avalanche of epigrams about the ball. The three young men joined in the conversation, and Susan discreetly effaced herself, joining a plain cousin on the other side of the room, who seemed rather out of it.

As Sir Godfrey and Julia were leaving, she said: “Oh, by the way, Susan, have you done with *A Divided Interest*? If you happen to have it with you, I could take it back if you like.”

“I posted it to you yesterday. It will be waiting for you at Woodlands.”

“That's all right, thank you. You did like it, now, didn't you? You must confess it's awfully vivid. My dear girl, I shouldn't go guiding too often if I were you. It must be frightfully strenuous. You've been the colour of a beetroot ever since you came in. I noticed it directly. Well, *au revoir* till after Christmas, I suppose.”

“Aren't you over-tired, Susan dear?” her mother asked, as the door was shut behind the last visitor. “Have you got a chill, do you think? Julia was quite right, you really are very flushed.

I think I'd better take your temperature, with all this influenza about."

Susan's mother and Aunt Em were sitting by the drawing-room fire alone, while their husbands played billiards. Susan had gone to bed. They had always been the best of friends these two; there was only a year between them in age, but Mrs. Collett looked fifteen years older than her sister, who was small and fair, with a fresh, unlined complexion.

Mrs. Collett was thin to emaciation, faded, and distinguished-looking; always, as though she were tired out, which, indeed, she had good reason to be.

"Girls are so restless," she complained, "if they're not dancing all the time, then they needs must rush about the country playing with Guides or Brownies, or organizing Women's Institutes or Nursing Associations or Invalid Children's Aid or something or other. None of them will settle down peaceably anywhere. There's Susan, now. How dusty and untidy she looked when she came in this afternoon, and Julia was so well turned out and smart—that girl does know how to put on her clothes—and it isn't as if Susan hadn't got clothes—you see to that, you kind thing—but it is a bit annoying, now isn't it?"

"You see, she had been playing with the

Brownies," Aunt Em pleaded in excuse. "It would have been silly to wear anything but old clothes. I wish she'd belong properly, then she'd have the uniform."

"That's Susan all over," her mother lamented; "she won't be bound down or tied up or 'belong' to anything or anyone. She must be perfectly free all the time to follow the caprice of the moment. She can't even stay a week quietly alone at Hatfield with Myrtle, but must come rushing up to London to help this Mrs. Tracey. . . ."

"I'm afraid I'm responsible for that," Aunt Em interrupted. "I asked her if she would."

"Well, if it hadn't been you it would have been somebody else. It annoys Myrtle, and I'm sure I don't wonder, and she *is* good, you know, taking us all in at any time. She must get very tired of it."

"I suppose," Aunt Em suggested apologetically, "that they all got so used to being busy during the war they feel they must go on being useful somehow. There is a lot needs doing, you know."

"I'm not finding fault with you, Em, but I do think Susan might take a little more interest in us instead of being so keen on all sorts of outside things. If she could amuse or entertain her father, now, what a boon that would be."

"But she hasn't had the chance of being much with you and Fred for months—has she? Don't

you think it's a bit hard on Susan, too, that she has no proper home and is always moving about? If only Fred would take a house somewhere and settle——”

“Sometimes,” Mrs. Collett murmured, unutterable weariness in her tired voice, “I fear that Fred will never consent to have a house again. In lots of ways, even though it makes things easier financially, I’m sorry he let the Manor. Had we been obliged to live there, even though we hadn’t sixpence to spend, he’d have had occupation. The farms were all let, he needn’t have preserved, and we could probably have rubbed along somehow. Then there would have been a home for Susan and the boys, and—for me. Oh, Em! you can’t think how *sick* I am of hotels and boarding-houses and moving about. First with the regiment—but we were younger then—though that was hard too, because it meant that I only got the children in snippets. And when we did come home we always seemed to be at the Manor most of the time, and though Myrtle always was kind—yet it wasn’t like my own house. You don’t know how I longed to have my children to myself. Any little house with only a couple of servants would have done—but, except in Scotland, I was never allowed to have it.”

“That’s the tragedy of India,” Aunt Em said. “That can’t be helped, but the house question can,

and ought to be. You're tired out. Can't you come here for three weeks after Christmas and do a rest-cure and stay in bed? It would do you all the good in the world. Let Susan look after Fred for a bit."

Mrs. Collett clasped her thin hands tightly and sat forward in her chair as though bracing herself to resist this tempting project. She shook her head, at the same time asking: "You do think Susan ought to help me more, then?"

"I think you, poor dear, are at the end of your tether, but I don't blame Susan, because you never give her a chance. Why not let her go with Fred directly after Christmas wherever he wants to go?—and you come here—it would do you no end of good."

"I couldn't leave Fred. If I seem to grumble, it's only that I do get so tired sometimes. Yet it's nice to be wanted, and I think he wants me more now than ever before. You know he has resigned from both his clubs? He hated meeting old cronies at the Rag. He always thinks they are sorry for him and he resents that, but now he has nowhere to go when he comes to London. . . ."

"All the more reason to keep him away from London. Let Susan go with him to play golf somewhere—she could do that. She plays quite a good game."

"Susan irritates her father," Mrs. Collett sighed.

"So does everybody else, just now," Aunt Em rejoined briskly. "He must just put up with her."

"She's afraid of annoying him, and that makes her awkward and abrupt."

"What about Robert and Hugh? Do they annoy him?"

"Robert does. He's so modern and utilitarian. . . . Fred can't take any interest in business, you know, and Robert is so keen."

"He's shaping very well, Charlie says, has no frills and works really hard. Surely Fred must see that it's a splendid chance for the boy. We've no children, and Charlie can do a lot for him with the firm when he has been right through the drudgery."

"I know. It's a splendid chance, and we're all ever so grateful; but what Fred can't understand is Robert's indifference about Aylberne. He was awfully hurt when Robert said by all means cut off the entail if Hugh didn't mind—and sell the place outright if it made things easier. Now David adored Aylberne. . . ."

Aunt Em leant across and laid her plump little hand on Mrs. Collett's clasped so tightly in her lap: "It seems a dreadful tangle just now, dear Jo, but perhaps as time goes on . . ."

"What I want to know is this," Mrs. Collett went on, as though she hadn't heard, "where do

parents come in in the new scheme of things? Do they count for absolutely nothing?"

"I suppose they count as much as ever they did as individuals, but that the mere fact of being a parent has lost its prestige."

"Why?"

"Partly, I suppose—but I can only speak from observation, not from experience, I'm not a parent unfortunately—because they claimed too much, and if ever any section of society claims too much—it goes under. Parents happen to have gone under just now—gone under pretty deep too; but they'll emerge again presently and perhaps be more influential than ever in a different way——"

"I'm sure we never wanted to push our parents under," Mrs. Collett said plaintively; "we loved them far too much."

"You and I, dear Jo, both left our parents before we were twenty and arranged our lives for ourselves."

"You may have," Mrs. Collett rejoined grimly. "I *never* have."

"You weren't under the domination of parents, though. David was beginning to walk before you were Susan's age."

"Well, it's not my fault Susan isn't married. I only wish she would marry a nice man. She's had quite good offers too. I don't know what she wants."

"Julia hasn't married either, and she's five years older than Susan."

"Oh, Julia! She's different."

"Very different——"

"She, at all events, is content with her own station in life and doesn't run after the democracy. It's that annoys Fred and Myrtle so about Susan."

"Fred and Myrtle would like to pretend that the democracy—as it exists at present—isn't really there. Or that, if it is, it ought to be hushed up like an improper story. But, my dear, it *is* there, all round us, everywhere, very strong and vital and clever——"

"Oh, clever—far too clever, and lazy into the bargain."

"It's clever enough, anyway, to size up people like Fred and Myrtle, and if they refuse to be friendly they'll find that they're just shouldered out of the way and left."

"After they've been robbed of everything."

"I don't think," Aunt Em said slowly, "that the new British democracy will ever go in for Russian methods. It won't despoil or murder an already impoverished aristocracy. It will just push them out of the way, and leave them behind on a sort of dreary mental siding where they can grouse to one another but can't alter anything."

"That's what children do nowadays to their parents."

"I suppose," Aunt Em said thoughtfully, "children *are* the new democracy."

CHAPTER VIII

I

ALL the way down to Hatfield, as she travelled with her parents on Monday afternoon, Susan was worried by the possibility of an accusing letter from Julia awaiting her at Aunt Myrtle's. Even in the comparative comfort and space of a first-class carriage (General Collett's efforts towards a rigid economy in all things had not yet extended to railway journeys) brought no ease of mind to Susan. So that when she arrived and found that there were no letters for her of any kind, it was as though a great weight were lifted from her shoulders, and she took part after dinner in the game of family Bridge with a better grace than usual.

General Collett played well; so did her mother. Susan's play was erratic and occasionally brilliant, but she persistently over-called, and all her sins were sins of commission, which annoyed her father.

Aunt Myrtle had played Bridge ever since Bridge was first introduced, but she never improved.

She had no imagination and no deductive instinct, but she fancied herself enormously, and always lost her temper along with her money.

Happily, this evening she won, owing to outrageous bids on the part of Susan, who was playing with her father.

Of the four people seated at that card table, three were as curiously alike in appearance as they were diverse in character.

There could be no question that Susan was her father's daughter, and her mother sitting between them as they faced each other was struck afresh by their strong resemblance.

General Collett, tall and soldierly and lean, wore his clothes with an air. His brown eyes were set and shaped like Susan's; but they had lost their fire, and about them and his handsome mouth were deep lines inscribed by bitterness and disappointment. His shoulders were not bent, but his thin neck, with that deep hollow at the base of the skull, indicative of ill-health, drooped forward as though his handsome head were too heavy for it.

Happy and successful and interested in many things besides soldiering, he had failed to do the impossible in the spring of 1918. And because he had refused to sacrifice a whole division in an avowedly hopeless enterprise, he had been relieved of his command and sent home. He belonged to

the old school of soldiers who neither explained nor extenuated their tactics. He made no complaints and refused to discuss the matter even with his wife. But his heart was broken and his spirit quenched. That David should be killed in action seemed to him merely the fortune of war. That he should be put out of action so short a time before the end seemed to him so crushing an injustice that it took all the savour out of life.

Still, he would do his best with what was left to him.

With all his honest soul he believed in the Sanctity of the Domestic Hearth. Everybody's domestic hearth. Hence family Auction Bridge. He would have been far happier sitting alone by the fire and reading *The Economic Consequences of the War*, but as the head of a household, even when it was unhoused, he considered it his duty to cater for the amusement of his womenkind by playing Bridge with them, even when one of them played Auction as badly as Aunt Myrtle.

Mrs. Collett looked from the faces on either side of her—the one so vivid and brilliant in its vigorous youth, the other so bleached and dimmed in its tired middle-age—to that of her sister-in-law opposite.

Placid, complacent, handsome, there was no droop about Aunt Myrtle's well-dressed head. She carried it high, and, in her, the arrogant Collett

nose and clear colouring were accentuated to hardness. Such lines as she had were the result of time rather than experience. A deep one just by the lobe of the ear. Very few round the eyes, but many faint parallel lines above her well-marked eyebrows, and two or three loose curves at the corners of her mouth. A physiognomist can divine a good deal from the lines at the corners of a woman's mouth.

Aunt Myrtle was obstinately decided about things that didn't matter, but when it came to the determination of something really important, she always wanted someone else to make up her mind for her.

"Shall we have another game?" General Collett inquired politely, when she had pointed out that he owed her one-and-ninepence.

"No," Susan said decidedly. "Aunt Em made me promise to send mother to bed at half-past nine, and it's a quarter to ten now. Off you go, Mum. Aunt Em's got the wind up about you and says you *must* rest more. What about breakfast in bed? I'll take it up, Aunt Myrtle. May she have it?"

"Dear Em has always been something of an alarmist," the General interposed. "Your mother hates breakfast in bed unless she is really ill—don't you, Jo?"

Mrs. Collett had risen in obedience to Susan's

summons. Was it the orange-shaded lamps that made her look so pale, Susan wondered . . . so lined and thin . . .

"I have felt a bit tired lately," she admitted, "and if Myrtle doesn't mind . . . just for a day or two . . ."

"It's always apt to upset the servants," Aunt Myrtle said judiciously, "but if Susan carries up the tray—— Mind you're down in time to do so, Susan."

II

Susan did come down in time and found three letters beside her plate. One from her brother Hugh in the Rifles; one from Julia—now she would know; and a third in handwriting she was not sure of—she felt she had seen it, but where? However, that didn't matter. It was Julia's that mattered. She stuffed it hastily into her pocket, for if Aunt Myrtle knew there was a letter from Julia she would expect Susan to show it to her—anyway, to read bits aloud. Aunt Myrtle was tiresome about letters. Susan thrust the other letter, too, into her pocket, leaving only Hugh's by her plate if Aunt Myrtle should come down; busied herself getting ready her mother's tray, carried it up and returned to find her aunt installed behind the coffee-pot. The General was late.

Susan allowed herself to read Hugh's letter during breakfast, and then was sorry she had, as there was very little in it for publication. It chiefly consisted of an urgent request to lend him five pounds wherewith to purchase Christmas presents for the family.

Even Aunt Em didn't know, though she suspected, what a lot of Susan's dress allowance went Hughwards.

At last breakfast was over. The General was late, and Susan had to wait until he had finished. The General's breakfast was a lengthy and important ritual.

Then she went to fetch her mother's tray, and Mrs. Collett felt hurt because she snatched it and hurried away "without waiting for a word."

Where could she go to read Julia's letter? She felt she could not bear the eyes of the family upon her while she did so.

Her father was smoking the matutinal cigar while he read the *Daily Argus* in the dining-room. Aunt Myrtle was in the drawing-room watering plants. The servants would be "doing the rooms" upstairs. It was pouring with rain, so the garden was impossible. Finally she took refuge in the morning-room, a small dark chamber where Aunt Myrtle paid wages and saw church-workers if they called on parish business.

She left the door ajar that she might hear any-one coming, tore open Julia's letter and read:

"MY DEAR SUSAN,—

"What have you done with my book?

"Lost it, I suppose, in spite of all your promises. But how could you be so childish as to imagine I would accept such a clumsy forgery as these feeble verses? Why, the very handwriting gave the whole thing away at a glance, though, oddly enough, your attempt at a literary scrawl is not unlike Alfrey's writing. Although, of course, any-one really familiar with it would detect the imposture at once.

"It's no good, Susan. Before you embark upon a career of crime, you should master a few of the elementary rules. An infant in arms would see through your poor little attempts at deception, and although I really am frightfully cross with you for losing my precious book, with its still more precious verses, I can't help smiling at your absurd little stratagem.

"Some day I'll show these verses to Alfrey without mentioning names—I won't give you away—and he'll be amused too, to think that someone boldly attempted to imitate his style and his handwriting without knowing anything of either the one or the other.

"He was here yesterday; came to the concert.

I got him on the telephone on Saturday evening, and I'm keener on him than ever.

"You see, in a year or two he'll have an enormous public and will prove a force to be reckoned with. Moreover, he's faithful and grateful and will remember then those who *believed* in his Genius before the Many-headed had realized it. And *I*, my dear, am chief of these far-seeing ones.

"Dear silly old Susan, to imagine you could deceive me, who know him so well and get to know him better every time we meet. That you could believe me to be so gullible annoys me even more than the fact that you've lost my precious book. I shan't tell him yet, lest he should be hurt and think it awful of me to lend his precious book to anyone. It *was* rather awful of me, but I trusted you.

"Your reproachful JULIA."

Susan turned hot and cold as she read, for she felt sure that if Julia did tell Alfrey about the verses he would at once own up that he had written them himself, and then Julia would feel a fool, and be more angry with her than ever.

Ought she to write to Mr. Stowe and warn him?

"Oh, *what* a web of sin we weave
When first we practice to deceive,"

Susan quoted, in a sort of cosmic despair. *The*

Crooked Way was nothing to the labyrinth in which she found herself.

She was pretty sure Julia was in love with the little man. Probably he was in love with Julia. That would be why he seemed so vague and unenthusiastic. A sensitive, reserved person would be like that when he was in love. Well, she must leave it. She wouldn't interfere any more. Perhaps, after all, Julia wouldn't tell him yet, and when they were engaged it wouldn't matter so much. Anyway, it was no use standing there thinking—she'd better open the other letter—that might be pleasanter.

But just at that moment she heard her aunt's voice in the hall. "Susan, where are you? I want you to come and hold that wool. What on earth are you doing in that cold room? I thought you were with your mother. Did she enjoy her breakfast? Come along, don't waste any more time."

It was eleven o'clock before Susan found a quiet moment in which to read the letter in the unknown handwriting. She managed it at last in her own room while she was putting on her hat. The rain had ceased and the General wanted a walk.

The note was short, a little island of small, neat writing in the centre of a large square sheet of paper.

"Dec. 15, 1920.

"3, HARE COURT,
"TEMPLE, E.C.

"DEAR MISS COLLETT,—

"The *Argus* is paying twenty guineas for that little sketch, so I have sent a cheque to Mrs. Tracey for that amount, according to your command. The Brownie article will be in Friday's issue, and I'll take leave to send you a copy in case, as I suspect, you only read the *Seer*.

"I hoped to meet you, and be officially introduced, on Sunday at Woodlands, but was disappointed.

"I am, yours most truly,
"ALFREY STOWE."

Susan did a little dance in front of her looking-glass. Twenty guineas for those East End Brownies! What a score! But it made the web thicker than ever.

The General was waiting in the hall when she went down.

"You take some time to get ready, Susan," he said, "but I must confess you look very nice."

III

Susan wrote to Julia and to Alfrey that afternoon, and posted the letters herself.

To Julia she said:

“JU DEAR,—

“You are right. It was atrocious of me. I did lose that book on the journey here. And though I have moved heaven and earth to get it back, each is equally adamant, and it hasn’t turned up.

“Please, please don’t tell Mr. Stowe, at least not yet. If you love me at all, Judy, grant me this favour. I don’t often ask favours, do I? But I ask this in all seriousness. You see, because you like him so much, I don’t want him to hate me when we meet at Woodlands.

“I am most awfully sorry.

“Try to forgive your really penitent

“SUSAN.”

She found it more difficult to write to Alfrey, and tore up three attempts before she achieved:

“DEAR MR. STOWE,—

“How generous of you to give all that large cheque to the Brownies. I am sure Mrs. Tracey will be awfully grateful. So am I, and I do thank you more than I can express. Aunt Myrtle takes the *Argus* and the *Seer*, so I shall see it on Friday. You may be quite sure I shall make a grab at the

paper the first moment I can. It will be frightfully exciting.

"With renewed thanks, I am, yours sincerely,
"SUSAN COLLETT."

As she poked the letters into the box she said to herself: "Well, that's the end of *that* for a while, anyway."

But Susan underestimated the power of the printed word.

"Some Blackfriars Brownies" was given a prominent column in the *Argus*. It was signed. It was whimsical and charming. It attracted attention. Alfrey had quoted the "Night-caps" song, and several other Brown Owls wrote to Mrs. Tracey demanding words and tune.

Susan had learnt the song from her nurse in nursery days, and had never written down either words or tune. And no one could find the little song in any of the more popular collections.

Moreover, four people sent Susan a copy of the *Morning Argus*. Alfrey's copy came first, straight from the office, by the afternoon post on Friday, and on Saturday came three other copies from Julia, Mrs. Tracey, and Aunt Em. And all three senders were full of curiosity as to when and how Alfrey could have seen the children.

Mrs. Tracey innocently supposed that he must have written the article from what Susan had told

him about the Guides, and graciously bade her "bring him in person" next time.

Julia pointed out how literary genius could breathe upon the dry bones of even the dullest subject and make it live. Aunt Em inquired: "Why on earth didn't you tell me you knew this Mr. Stowe, and we'd have asked him to dinner while you were with us. I like his last book so much. How queer and secretive of you, Susan."

Her father and Aunt Myrtle were rather gratified that any philanthropic enterprise graced by the presence of a Collett should receive due recognition, and Susan turned cold with terror when her father said:

"Did Mrs. Tracey introduce the young man to you, Susan? What is he like?"

"Mrs. Tracey has never seen him," Susan replied emphatically, "and I've no idea what he's like . . . except that I suppose he's like the pictures one sees of him in the illustrated papers——"

"Ah! a journalist, I suppose," the General said easily. "They pop about all over the place and make notes, but it's odd he should have heard your song."

CHAPTER IX

I

JANUARY, 1922, and a horrible night.

Outside it seemed to be raining ice, but it was warm and scented and softly radiant in Julia's pretty sitting-room. Scented by Roman hyacinths in jade-green bowls. Lighted by electric lamps in alabaster shades. A wood-fire whispered on the orange-tiled hearth, and Julia herself was in harmony with the room. She was wearing a wonderful blue-green dress, heavily embroidered with almost Eastern delicacy and brilliance. A dress with no sleeves and next to no back, from which her thin arms and sharp shoulder-blades emerged white and challenging.

Alfrey Stowe had dined well and wine well. He was in the mood that easily responds to frankly expressed admiration. Admiration—not of himself—he would have suspected that of insincerity but admiration of his work was always welcome. Moreover, since he had discovered her innocent deception about the verses, he felt very tender

towards Julia. Not exactly in love, you know, but he liked to be with her alone. And lately she had contrived that he always was with her alone for part of the time, even when there was a house-party. To-night there had been nobody but Sir Godfrey and his scientific guest; and it seemed to be taken for granted that they should go to Sir Godfrey's study and he and Julia to her sitting-room.

As usual, Julia lay crouched on her black divan, propped up by black and orange pillows. Alfrey stood leaning against the mantelshelf and warmed his back while he looked down on the recumbent Julia. Certainly her line was beautiful, but he wished she would wear more clothes.

The icy rain lashed at the windows.

"Aren't you glad to be in this warm nest?" Julia asked.

"Very glad," Alfrey agreed.

It really was most pleasant in that room.

"Come and sit here," Julia commanded, patting the divan. "There's lots of room, and it's so comfortable."

Rather gingerly he seated himself sideways on the edge of the black expanse, so that he shouldn't have his back towards Julia.

She smiled at him. "Why are you so prim?" she asked. "Are you afraid of me?"

"I should be singularly ungrateful if I were

—and yet, I believe I am a bit afraid of you. You are so inscrutable.”

“Inscrutable? Me? Why, I’m the simplest creature possible. All made up of direct, primitive instincts and impulses. It’s you who are inscrutable. I’m never sure whether you really like me or not.”

Alfrey sat a thought more firmly on the divan. “Again,” he said, “you imply quite incredible stupidity and ingratitude in me.”

“Only old people want gratitude,” Julia pouted. “Liking and gratitude have even less to do with each other than liking and love.”

“Don’t you think,” Alfrey suggested, “that sometimes one begins with liking——”

“No. At least that’s not my way. For me the two are poles asunder. Liking can be spread thin over innumerable people, but love takes you and submerges you in its own strength.”

All the time she had been talking he was conscious that some part of him, some deeply hidden unruly part of his mental personality, was criticizing her voice and accent.

What was it that they lacked?

What was it that he wanted?

Hers was a well-bred voice, a cultivated accent, and yet . . .

Where had he heard what he wanted?

While he was trying to strangle that captious,

critical imp at the back of his brain, he became conscious of a curious tension in the scented silence.

Julia's quick breathing was quite audible.

Suddenly she swung her long legs off the divan and stood up.

"I love firelight to talk in, don't you?" she said, and, moving to the hearth, switched off the lights. "Now we can be really confidential," she continued, and sat down beside him. "Why are you so silent? What are you thinking about?"

"You," he whispered.

Her bare shoulder was touching his. She looked fair and mysterious and desirable in the warm, flickering light.

"I would like to know what you think about me," she whispered. "I think about you so much."

"Do you?" he asked, touched to stronger feeling by this tribute. "I fear I am not worthy of your pretty thoughts, but I'm proud that they should concern themselves with me."

Did she move a little nearer to him? His heart was thumping in his ears. His senses were intoxicated by her atmosphere. Her eyes held his and her lips were very near.

He caught her to him and kissed her. In a moment her arms were round his neck and clasping him closely, while she responded to his kisses

with a passion and abandon that swept him away upon a tide of purely sensuous oblivion.

It had ceased to rain when Alfrey Stowe walked across Wimbledon Common to catch his train. It was still bitterly cold, but the stars were shining and the air was clean and bracing.

He was engaged to Julia Mainwaring, and he tried to feel how fortunate he was.

But his head ached, and at the back of his consciousness of good fortune was an uncomfortable tremor not unlike consternation.

What would Julia's father say?

What would his mother think of Julia?

And what, oh what, would Julia think of his mother?

For a newly engaged man with a brilliant marriage in the near future, Alfrey Stowe looked uncommonly grave as he waited for the train at Wimbledon.

II

Alfrey's mother and her only sister, Mrs. Cayley, were sitting on each side of the dining-room fire at The Nook.

The chairs they sat in were large, substantial, strong-sprunged, well-stuffed, leather-covered chairs, with arms just high enough to support the elbows

comfortably. The sort of chairs that are described in catalogues as "gent's library." But roomy as were the chairs, the two ladies amply filled them.

The years had not much changed Mrs. Stowe. Her smooth, tightly braided hair was streaked with grey. Her broad shoulders were, perhaps, a little bent, but her dark eyes were lively and observant as ever, and just then her quick ears, too, were alert for the postman's knock.

Alfrey's letters usually came by the afternoon post, and it was four days since she had one.

Mrs. Cayley, known to her family as "Aunt Claire," was even stouter than Mrs. Stowe. Her face was quite as large and her chins even more pronounced. But whereas Mrs. Stowe's face was frankly and unblushingly left to display itself just as soap and water had left it, Aunt Claire's was obscured by a sort of mauve film somewhat resembling the coloured gauze curtains mistaken people sometimes hang before their windows. Her blue eyes were merry and slyly twinkling. Her hair was parted at the side, elaborately waved, and the colour of a chestnut newly burst from its sheath. Yet if you had sufficient imagination to reconstruct Aunt Claire's appearance minus five or six stone of weight, there were distinct traces of former beauty.

Moreover, the stage, the variety stage of the

early 'eighties, had set its seal upon her: unmistakable as the seal of Shiva on the forehead of a pious Hindu. She had started at eighteen in the "Avenue" chorus under the name of Claire Alfrey (her real name was Clara Jeffs), and her sister's son was called after the talented member of the family.

"There's the post," Mrs. Stowe exclaimed. "You might see what it is. You're quicker on your feet than me."

This was true. Aunt Claire, in spite of her bulk, moved lightly and easily. "One from Alfrey for you," she said as she returned, "and a letter and two bills for me."

Silence while the sisters read their letters.

Presently Aunt Claire looked up from the bills she had been frowning over to find her sister still absorbed in Alfrey's letter, although it didn't seem very long.

"Any news?" she asked.

"News!" Mrs. Stowe exclaimed. "I should just think there is news. Alfrey's got engaged to be married."

"Never!" Aunt Claire exclaimed. "Whoever to? Do you know her? Read it out."

"Of course I don't know her. I don't know any of Alfrey's lady friends. It's only men he brings down here—naturally."

"Well, who is she?"

"She's a Miss Mainwaring. Her father's Sir Godfrey Mainwaring—a doctor or something."

"Oh, he's a 'sir,' is he? Knight or baronet, I wonder? What's the girl's name?"

"Julia."

"Aren't you goin' to read me what he says?"

Mrs. Stowe's large face flushed. "I'm not sure . . ."—she hesitated—" . . . whether Alfrey'd quite like it. . . . You see, it's a serious thing—and he's written very free and kind. . . . You don't mind, Claire?"

"Of course I don't mind," Aunt Claire said briskly. "You're his mother. Naturally he'd write his heart out to you, and him so ready with a pen. I hope she's a nice girl."

"I could wish," Mrs. Stowe said slowly, "that she hadn't been quite so grand. . . . I hope she will be kind to Alfrey."

"Kind!—of course she'll be kind, since she's in love with him. Does *he* sound very much in love, Emma?"

"He's very serious, Claire—sort of solemn and gentle . . . and, oh dear me! do you think she'll take him right away from me?"

"Don't be silly—as if anyone could take him right away from you. It'll be different, of course, but . . . You'll like having a daughter, won't you?"

"I never had but one daughter, and I don't

want anyone in her place, but I'm quite ready to love Alfrey's wife if she'll let me. . . . I wish we knew more about them."

"If he's a 'sir' he'll be in *Who's Who*. Isn't there one in Alfrey's study?"

"Yes, there is. Could you go upstairs and get it? My legs seem a bit shaky . . . such unexpected news."

While her sister went upstairs Mrs. Stowe folded Alfrey's letter very carefully, put it back in the envelope, kissed it, and thrust it into her pocket.

"Now," Aunt Claire said, seating herself and opening the fat red book, "here's 1919—what's the name? Mainwaring, did you say?—a doctor? Here he is."

"Alfrey says it's pronounced 'Mannering.'"

"Oh, does he? Well, it's all one to me—though why names should be spelt one way and said another seems a bit silly. Listen: 'MAINWARING, Godfrey Lawes. 1st Bt., cr. 1912. K.C.V.O. 1911. M.D., M.R.C.S., L.R.C.P. Physician for Mental and Nervous Diseases; Consulting Physician British Hospital for Mental Disorders and Brain Diseases. Founder and President——'"

"Oh, skip all that, Claire. Where was he born? Whose son was he? And who did he marry?"

“‘B. Chippenham, 12th March, 1864,’” Aunt Claire continued obediently, “‘E. son William Mainwaring, of Chippenham, Wilts. M. Helen, y.d. of David Collett, Aylberne Manor. Wilts (d. 1913). One d.’”

“That’ll be her,” Mrs. Stowe exclaimed, “and to think she’s related to the Colletts. That fairly gets over me.”

“Why, what does that matter?”

“They lived just three miles out from here—thought no end of themselves, they did—but the place is let now. Well go on——”

“‘Educ. Merchant Taylors’ School, King’s College Hospital, and studied psychiatry at various continental clinics. Made a special study of mind and character——’”

“Never mind all that.”

“‘Publications,’” Aunt Claire began again. “‘Confusional and Stuperose States, Psychology of the——’”

“No, Claire, I refuse to listen to lists of books about diseases. They always make me feel bad.”

“Recreations: dry-fly fishing, yachting, golf. Addresses: 44 Harley Street; and Woodlands, Wimbledon, Surry, Clubs: Athenæum and Travellers.’”

“I hope to goodness they won’t want to take Alfrey yachting,” Mrs. Stowe said anxiously.

"He'd be sick every minute of the time; he can't bear the sea."

"You've made me miss out yards and yards," Aunt Claire complained. "He's evidently a most distinguished man."

"Well, what if he is? So's Alfrey. A comin' man, Alfrey is. Mr. Stokes at the libery said so to me only yesterday, and he knows."

"Of course Alfrey's 'coming.' We all know that, but this Sir Godfrey's come, arrived, at the very top of the tree too. Our Alfrey's done uncommonly well for himself, I consider. I always was afraid he'd marry some insignificant little snip of a girl who'd be no sort of use to him when he got famous."

"I don't believe," Mrs. Stowe protested, "that anything of that sort ever crossed his mind. From all I could make out—but he's never been one for much talk—it was these Mainwarings who were everlastingly asking him there, not him running after them."

"Well, well, whichever way it was, it has turned out for the best. *I'm* ambitious for Alfrey, even if you aren't."

"Nobody could be more ambitious for Alfrey than his own mother; but I could wish his young lady hadn't been related to those Colletts."

"Why, what's the matter with the Colletts? What have the Colletts done to you?"

Mrs. Stowe shook her head. "I don't care about them, that's all, and I dare say this girl's quite different. If only she's good to my Alfrey. . . ."

"Really, Emma, one would think, to hear you talk, that the girl was marrying him just to make him unhappy. It seems to me she must love him very much to have taken him, and her in such high society. You know, I'm as fond of Alfrey as anyone, but no one could say he's exactly showy."

"Who wants a man to be showy? Least of all, folks like that."

"Well, girls do like a good-lookin' man and a persuasive voice."

"There you go—on about voices. Alfrey gets it from you, I suppose, but he can never describe anyone without going on about their voice. 'He's got such an agreeable voice,' or, 'She's got a harsh voice—I couldn't endure it,' as if a voice mattered except for singin'. I bet you anything you like this girl's got a pretty voice, and got round him that way, or he wouldn't have looked at her."

"Claude, my first," Aunt Claire said reminiscently, "had the very sweetest voice I ever heard in a man."

"I dare say he had—and a fat lot of good his beautiful voice ever did you, leavin' you like he did after two years."

"Yes," Aunt Claire agreed, "he was a bad lot, was Claude; but he made love, on the boards and off, better than any man *I've* ever come across, and I've sampled a good many."

III

There was a family gathering at Woodlands to introduce Alfrey Stowe to the Mainwaring relations. Tribes of Colletts and Mainwarings were there; many of Julia's friends, and a few friends, but no relatives, of the prospective bridegroom.

Susan had come up from Hatfield the night before to help Julia, and, so he said, to console her uncle. Sir Godfrey was fond of Susan. He declared her to be the most perfectly normal person that he knew, and normality, to a man who spent most of his time dealing with nervy folk, was attractive.

Susan was much intrigued and excited. There was the satisfaction of feeling that she had foreseen the engagement from the very first moment she had heard of Alfrey. There was the intriguing knowledge she had of Alfrey, unknown to Julia. There was the interesting phenomenon of Julia in love again.

For it was again.

Susan had seen and heard, at long length, Julia in love on several previous occasions; for Julia was given to confidences.

Never before, however, had her engagement been publicly announced in the daily papers, the *Court Circular*, the *Tatler*, and to all the innumerable relations.

Sir Godfrey had proved most accommodating. This young man's job was in London. They could have a flat in town and spend the week-ends at Woodlands, and Julia could still act as hostess at her father's Sunday parties. Moreover, the young man seemed destined to do well in his literary job. His obscure origin, Sir Godfrey decided, didn't really matter. There was no tiresome complication in the shape of a large family (having himself married into a large family, Sir Godfrey knew how entangling it could be). No brothers or sisters. No father. Only an old mother living somewhere in the country, and she, it was to be hoped, would die reasonably soon. Alfrey Stowe was making quite a decent income, and there were no financial claims upon it. He hadn't got to keep his mother. She was quite well provided for. Sir Godfrey had made searching inquiries as to that. With the handsome allowance he was prepared to make Julia, they would be quite comfortable. Julia was twenty-eight and Alfrey thirty. There was no earthly reason why they should not be married directly after Easter.

It is possible that Julia's father was rather

relieved that she had finally fixed upon a man who, although of humble birth and no presence, was yet of sufficient brilliance in his own line, and who was (Sir Godfrey believed) of unimpeachable integrity and steadiness.

Once or twice he had been well frightened by Julia's love affairs. He disliked divorce, and her flirtations with men who were still married or recently divorced had caused him much anxiety. There was that professional dancer too, a quite dreadful young man. Sir Godfrey shuddered at the recollection. He would be thankful to have her settled so near him with a kind young husband. He was sure Alfrey Stowe was kind, and he believed in kindness.

IV

The large drawing-room at Woodlands was crowded. Alfrey, perspiring and bewildered, had been introduced to nine uncles and thirteen aunts. Aunts always muster in great force at any function even remotely connected with a wedding. He had quite lost count of the cousins and for a moment had hidden himself behind a heavy curtain that draped one side of a bow window, when he heard his future father-in-law say: "Not been introduced to him yet? Come with me, Susan, and I'll show him what we can do in the

way of young women in our family. He's had all the aunts I know, so now we must produce the nieces."

"Poor man."

Alfrey started. Yes. It *was* the sweet, companionable voice.

"Do let him alone for a few minutes, Uncle Godfrey; he must be sick of introductions. And perhaps he's shy."

"These writing chaps are never really shy. Where can the chap have got to? I saw him myself not five minutes ago talking to Aunt Myrtle. Ah, here he is!"

And at last Alfrey was formally introduced to Susan. A tall, radiant Susan, admirably turned out in a brown knitted coat-frock with threads of gold shining all through it. A gay, glad Susan, smiling all over her face.

It was well, perhaps, that Sir Godfrey merely introduced them and passed on.

"I felt it was coming," Susan said, "your engagement, I mean, and I *do* congratulate you. Julia and I have always been friends, and I'm so glad it's you. . . . Has she ever said anything about that book yet?"

"Not a word."

"Do you think I ought to confess?"

"Honestly, I see no necessity. Shall I steal it

sometime and destroy it? Then I can give her another and no one will be a penny the worse."

Susan considered. "I expect she's been so busy. . . . If it could softly and silently vanish away . . . but no. Better leave it alone and I will carry my guilty secret with me to the grave."

"I'll have to carry it too, you know. It's not only your secret."

"A secret shared is a responsibility doubled."

"What's that about secrets?" Julia interrupted, and Alfrey started, for her voice was strident with curiosity. She had come up behind them just in time to hear Susan's last words.

"Uncle Godfrey has just introduced me to Mr. Stowe——"

"And there and then you discuss secrets. Alfrey, I am much intrigued. Do tell me how in the world secrets came into the conversation."

"How can I? How does anything come into the conversation? Have you had any tea yet? I'm sure you must both want it. Let's go and get some. Please come too, Miss Collett."

"No," Julia said firmly. "Susan can't come if I do. She must stay and look after the people who've got no one to talk to. Take Susan if you like, but you can't have us both."

As he followed Julia to the tea-room, he won-

dered afresh why all women couldn't have soft, adorable voices. After all, he only wanted to listen to that girl, and where was the harm in that?

CHAPTER X

I

“**I** THINK it was quite a success,” Julia said as she and Susan were brushing their hair together that night. “Alfrey seemed awfully impressed at the size of our clan, and we’re a good-looking crowd when you see us all together.”

“Were any of his people there?”

“None of his people. A few of his friends. Mercifully he’s not possessed of many people.”

“Why ‘mercifully’?”

“Well—in-laws are always a nuisance, for one thing.”

“What about him, then? He’ll have simply endless in-laws!”

“That’s quite different. A woman always belongs to her own people, whether married or not. A man is necessarily assimilated. When a man marries he naturally belongs more to his wife’s people than to his own.”

“Isn’t that a bit hard on the man’s people?”

“Possibly; but it’s life.”

"What people has . . . Mr. Stowe?"

"Don't call him Mr. Stowe when he's nearly your cousin. Call him Alfrey, of course."

"Well, what people has—your Alfrey?"

"Of near relations, I'm truly thankful to say, he has only one—a mother—there is an aunt, I believe—but his mother is equal to a whole battalion. If I didn't love Alfrey so tremendously. . . . She is a terror!"

"A terror? How? Have you seen her?"

"I have, my dear. For my sins I have. Three days after we were engaged he whirled me off to Frampton Massey (did I tell you he comes from Frampton Massey?—isn't it curious?) just for the day, to make his mamma's acquaintance. Susan, she is quite, quite impossible. How she comes to be the mother of a genius like Alfrey is one of the mysteries mortal mind cannot hope to fathom."

"How do you mean? What is she like? Is she stuffy and severe?"

"Oh dear no. I almost wish she was. She's stout and 'jolly' and markedly, middle-class—lower middle-class. She's what Aunt Myrtle would call 'a person.'"

"Be more definite, Julia. Aunt Myrtle calls everybody 'persons.'"

"She talks a lot and laughs a lot, and her laugh always ends in a wheeze. But the worst of it is,

Alfrey seems to find great amusement in what she says."

"Still, Julia, that's better than if she was disagreeable."

"And it's such an awful house," Julia continued, "a pink villa with aspidistras in the windows and lace curtains and mahogany furniture. Tea-cosies and chair-backs, you know the sort of thing—one reads about it but one never sees it. Not in our set."

"Was she nice to you? Did she seem pleased?"

"My dear, I was so petrified I really can't tell you. We simply *can't* ever have her with us in London."

"I shouldn't say that," Susan pleaded. "What does it matter? Everybody has got odd relations; and with all these new rich about, we're quite used to the queerest people."

"She wouldn't mix with any people we know," Julia lamented. "It's hopeless to think of it. And it has decided me that we must start with a service flat and no spare bedroom of any sort. If we want guests, we must have them here at week-ends. Father wants us here always at week-ends."

"But will he like that?" Susan asked.

"Who? Father? Of course he will. He says so."

"I don't mean Uncle Godfrey—Mr. Stowe—Alfrey."

"My dear, he *must* see. Of course, he's loyal and affectionate and all that. I shouldn't wish him to be anything else. And he can run down to Frampton Massey from time to time to see her. I'll even go with him if he wishes it, though I shall be bored to tears. There's nothing on earth to do down there for, except go on the river, and one can only do that in summer."

"But, Julia, listen. If he's fond of his mother, and you say he is, he'll want her to be asked to his house sometimes. I know I wouldn't marry anybody who wouldn't let me have Mum to stay."

"Aunt Jo is quite different. Everybody knows about her people. You can't compare Alfrey's extraordinary mother with *anyone* you know."

"But you don't love your parents because they belong to well-known families," Susan argued. "You just love them because they're they. Be careful, Julia. You may hurt him dreadfully if you seem to ignore his mother."

Julia shrugged her shoulders. "Far from ignoring his mother, I'm only too acutely aware of her. But I tell you frankly, she's quite impossible—she won't mix. And I couldn't turn my flat into a retreat just because she happened to be staying. I assure you I'm considering her quite as much

as myself. I don't want the poor old thing to be puzzled and hurt, and no one can be sure what people will say or do nowadays."

"She must have met her son's friends sometimes."

"Alfrey has never said. No; there's only one way out of it, and that's no spare bedroom."

Julia sat on by the fire for a long time after Susan had gone back to her room. Her fair hair hung round her like a veil and her eyes were very soft, for she was thinking of Alfrey. Perhaps Susan was right. She would try to be nice to his mother. Not have her to stay with them in London. That would be absurd, and as uncomfortable for her as it would be for them. But next time she went to Frampton Massey with Alfrey she would listen while the old lady burred and try to be interested. She'd encourage the old thing to talk about Alfrey's childhood; she'd be certain to like that.

Yes. Julia determined to be patient: patient and kind.

She lifted a long tress of her hair and held it to her lips. Alfrey loved her hair. Two evenings ago she had taken it down to show it to him while they were alone in her sitting-room. He was sitting on the floor leaning against her knees, and he quoted Swinburne's

"Kissing her hair I sat against her feet."

She thrilled afresh even in remembering the ecstasy of that moment.

What a long time it seemed till Easter. She wanted to belong to him now: to belong to him absolutely. She wanted him. Oh, how she wanted him! There was nothing one couldn't say to Alfrey. He was so understanding. He was so entirely at one with her as to the beauty and necessity of the physical things that stuffy-minded people hushed up and hid away. Susan, now, was funny about that. Not that she was stuffy-minded. You couldn't call her that. Nor was she a prude. But about certain things she seemed to close up tight somehow and you couldn't get at her. And she never gave confidence for confidence.

Once, about a year ago, Julia had said to her father: "Don't you think Susan's rather secretive?"

And he turned and looked at her in his keen, considering way: "So you've discovered that, have you? Only secretive's not the word. Susan, my child, is in some respects rather like a lock that nothing but a certain combination will undo. You've only got to look at her mouth to see that."

"Yet I shouldn't call it a hard mouth, would you?"

"Certainly not. But if you notice how the lips close down on one another, how there isn't a

smudgy line anywhere, and how her chin fits underneath her mouth—you realize that Susan is spared that intense desire to confide that besets most women.”

“It would be rather amusing to be the combination that unlocks Susan.”

“I’m not sure that amusing is quite what it would be.”

“Daddy, does the desire to confide beset me very badly?”

Her father laughed. “I shouldn’t say that reticence is your strongest characteristic, my dear, and I’m glad of it, for I never feel shut outside.”

“And would you—do you—from Susan?”

“No, Judy, no. I’m not going back on Susan. She’s a very special crony of mine.”

As she remembered this Julia felt kindly towards Susan. She too was fond of her, and lately Susan had been awfully decent. So sympathetic about her engagement. Yes; she would remember what Susan had said about Alfrey’s tiresome old mother.

II

“Susan!” Aunt Myrtle spoke in a sort of stage whisper. “Is it true that young author—that Mr. Stowe—comes from Frampton Massey?”

She and Susan were alone in the library at Woodlands the morning after the party.

"I believe so, Aunt Myrtle."

"Is he a son of that confectioner woman who had the restaurant there?"

"I think it is quite probable."

"Does your Uncle Godfrey know this?"

"Why shouldn't he know it, if it's the case?"

"Well!" Aunt Myrtle sat back in her chair and laid the jumper she was knitting on her knee. "It's the first thing that has at all reconciled me to the fact that the Manor is let to those Mabbit people. Do you realize, Susan, that when Julia marries this young man Stowe, that woman will become a distant connection of ours?"

"I suppose she will."

"And you don't care?" Aunt Myrtle demanded indignantly.

"I don't see what there is to care about. It can't make any difference to us one way or another. It's Julia who's marrying him, not you or me. And listen, Aunt Myrtle, Mrs. Mabbit has asked me to stay with them next week for the Hunt balls, just from Monday to Thursday."

"And you want to go?"

"Well, I do, rather. I've got a couple of frocks made. It'll be great fun and I'd meet any amount of old friends, and the Mabbits are kind people. She wants me to help her with the house-party, and I could. Dad wouldn't object, I know."

"How you can *bear* to go I can't imagine. But

young people nowadays have no sentiment, no respect or affection for old associations. The fact that it was your home for so many happy years doesn't count at all with you, I suppose?"

"But, Aunt Myrtle, it's just because I'm so fond of Aylberne I jump at any chance of seeing it again."

"It would simply break my heart to see these alien people in the dear familiar rooms. Sitting in my father's chair, feeding at his table, all the furniture altered probably—and yet you can go and stay with them."

"If I didn't go and stay with them I should never see Aylberne at all. They're good tenants. They've done no end to the cottages and the home farm. I hear the people who bought the other farms only wish they were still tenants. Dad wants us to be friendly with them, they've been so decent. He said so."

"Will you go and call on your new relation while you're at Aylberne? I've no doubt Mrs. Mabbit would let you have a car. I hear they've got three—the brutes."

Aunt Myrtle's voice was intensely sarcastic.

"That's an idea," Susan exclaimed gaily. "I hadn't thought of it. But now you suggest it, perhaps it might be the right thing to do. I'll ask Julia. It's awfully decent of you to think of it, Aunt Myrtle."

"Susan," Aunt Myrtle said solemnly, "you know very well I only spoke ironically. I never conceived the possibility of your doing anything of the sort."

"Well, Aunt dear, you can't blame me if I do call now, when you suggested it yourself. Honestly, I think it would only be kind when I'm down there, anyway."

Aunt Myrtle shook her head and closed her eyes—her way of dismissing an argument. Suddenly she leant forward in her chair and in another sibilant stage-whisper demanded: "Do you like him, Susan?"

"Like who?"

"This Alfrey Stowe."

"I don't know enough about him to say," Susan replied cautiously.

"I consider it a very poor match for Julia," Aunt Myrtle continued, in the same penetrating whisper, "but, of course, she's getting on and she's always crazy about artists and authors and people."

"Then it's a good thing she's going to marry one," Susan said cheerfully.

"I confess I'm surprised at your Uncle Godfrey. I should have thought he would have been more ambitious for his only child. To let her marry a confectioner's son seems to me very odd. I suppose they'll say his father—or was it his mother?—was a 'caterer'—it sounds better."

"But, Aunt Myrtle, Alfrey Stowe himself is a well-known writer, and Julia isn't going to marry his parents. . . . But about Aylberne: I'll be back in plenty of time to help you move to Hove."

"And who is to look after your brother's dog while you're away? You know, I only allowed Hugh to leave the animal because you were there to take him out. A large dog like that! And he makes dreadful holes in the garden. I don't think it's fair of you, Susan, to leave him planted on me."

"Poor old Bingo! I'll get the vet. to take him, Aunt Myrtle, while I'm away. I really do want to go to Aylberne, and when we're at Hove I exercise him myself every day. He shan't be a bit of trouble and he can't dig any holes there, for it's all asphalt."

"Remember I don't object to retrievers as dogs. But what Hugh wants with one when all the shooting is let to those Mabbits—who probably don't know one end of a gun from another—I can't think."

"It is rather a shame," Susan said, "the way we all come and plant ourselves down on you. But you know you wouldn't like it if you never saw any of us. Now would you?"

"I hope," Aunt Myrtle said, a little mollified, "that I am not so lacking in natural affection as

not to welcome the children I practically brought up. But there are limits to one's patience."

"I know. I know. But you don't mind Bingo really. I believe you're rather fond of him."

"I'm fond of all sporting animals, and I'm glad that Hugh, at all events, retains *some* love of sport. The Colletts have always been good sportsmen."

"What about grandfather?"

"Your grandfather was a scholar and an old gentleman when you knew him, Susan. As a young man he, no doubt, shared in all the pleasures of his class."

"I wonder," thought Susan. But she didn't say it aloud.

III

Alfrey was acutely conscious that Julia's visit to his mother had not been a success. Julia had been aloof and silent. His mother nervous and loquacious: as if by a flood of irrelevant conversation she hoped to submerge the wall that stretched between them.

Like most of us, Mrs. Stowe was not at her best when she was nervous.

They talked a different language, she and Julia. It was impossible for Mrs. Stowe to learn Julia's, but Alfrey had hoped that Julia, being young and adaptable, would try to understand his mother.

He was devoted to his mother and was proud of her. Proud of her business acumen; her sturdy common sense; her humorous, tolerant outlook. It was inconceivable to him that any intelligent person could fail to realize her essential bigness and warm-hearted constancy; or that an occasional misplaced "h" or what he called her "dear little bad grammar," could weigh a feather in comparison with her assured stand-byness in every vicissitude.

Alfrey was quite aware that, much as his mother loved him and rejoiced in his literary success, he was in certain respects a disappointment to her.

How she would have gloried in a handsome rattle of a son, good at games, who could ride to hounds, shoot, play cards, dance.

She would gladly have made any sacrifice, would have thoroughly enjoyed stinting herself to pay debts incurred in the course of these amusements. And failing that, she would have loved it had he been the boisterous, energetic type of muscular Christian who was "an immense influence for good."

Alfrey cared nothing for games and was a bad hand at all of them. He detested cards; and he was neither muscular nor had she good grounds for believing he was an orthodox Christian. His tailor, and he went to quite a good one, never succeeded in making him look anything but insig-

nificant and unnoticeable; the sort of young man who calls to take the electric-light meter.

But there was one thing he could do to please her. He could create the kind of young man she would have liked him to be. He did it in the very first book he ever wrote, and she adored that book.

"It passes me, Alfrey," she would say, "how you can write like you do about cricket and that, you that holds a bat like it was a fire-shovel. An' I can see the beautiful creases in that chap's trousers—though you say nothing about them—just as if he was stood in front of me; and you never remembering to pull up yours, and every pair you've got sagging at the knees something awful, with sitting so much."

In the book he was at work on now there was a mother with an ungrateful cub of a son who hurt her dreadfully, and because he agonized with the mother in his book, it made him the more understanding and tender towards that real mother in the pink villa down at Frampton Massey.

It was true he had not spoken much about his mother to Julia. Newly engaged young people have so much to say about themselves and each other. Besides, he took it for granted that Julia would understand. If people didn't understand the deepest things of the heart without insistence or explanation, then he had no use for them.

Surely the girl he loved, who loved him—he

was sure of that—would see at a glance what was so plain to him, and would be tender to his mother just because of her limitations.

Yet all Julia had seen, and he knew it, was a fat, flushed, middle-class—very middle-class—old woman, with plump, tremulous hands that nervously plucked at her skirt; and a voice that trailed off into a husky whisper at the ends of her sentences.

For Julia saw every one against a certain social background, and against that background Mrs. Stowe did not show up well.

Moreover, since Alfrey had been somewhat silent about his mother, Julia conceived in him a shame similar to her own.

Never would she attempt to force his confidence. If he preferred to be silent about his impossible old parent, she would be silent too. He would appreciate her delicacy.

Alfrey was puzzled and a little hurt. Was it possible that Julia did not understand? And if she failed to understand him in this, could she understand him in anything? Was his mother hurt too? he wondered.

He had only been engaged a week and already these questions somewhat obscured the sun of his happiness.

There had been any amount of roses and raptures,

lilies and languors in his brief betrothal to Julia; but he felt she knew no more of the real essential Alfrey Stowe to-day, than the first time she wrote to him, never having seen him, in praise of his last book.

Julia must understand. Or was it just that she, too, was nervous and shy in that first meeting.

But if she found it so difficult to get on with his mother, what on earth would she think of Aunt Claire?

CHAPTER XI

I

MRS. MABBIT'S father had been a country doctor outside Coventry. An altruistic, socialist sort of doctor, who honestly desired the greatest good of the greatest number. Therefore she had grown up with a sense of responsibility towards the community in an atmosphere of ideals.

This sense of responsibility she had never lost, and she carried it with her into her prosperity. Such conscientiousness would have been admirable had she been content merely to possess it and act up to it.

Unfortunately for herself, however, she was rather too much aware of her own altruism, and expected universal recognition of it from other people. Recognition, not only of her actual good deeds and benefactions, which were lavish, but of the spirit which directed them. And this at a time when there were so many "jumped-up gentry," people suddenly enriched by the war; and so infinitely many more impoverished

gentlefolks who, from the same cause, had lost not only their dearest and best beloved, but nearly all their money as well.

It was too much to expect that the world in general should recognize that she and her husband were not of the usual type of profiteers.

She had expected it. And she was deeply hurt and rather indignant that the little world of Frampton Massey and the surrounding villages neither praised nor sympathized with their conduct of affairs since they took over Aylberne Manor from the Colletts.

The county families in that part of Wiltshire were far too busy stretching the ends of their slender resources, that they might bridge the ever-widening gulf of expenditure, to care a German mark whether the Mabbits were good citizens or not.

Therefore poor Mrs. Mabbit was inclined to pose as cruelly misunderstood, and to be plaintive about it; and plaintive people are always a bore.

Susan arrived at Aylberne on Monday before the rest of the house-party. All the other guests were coming next day in time for the Frampton Massey Hunt ball.

The Challow Vale Hunt held theirs on Wednesday.

Mrs. Mabbit met her in the hall with the

devastating news that a man had failed them.

She'd just had a telegram. He'd slipped and put out his knee at Badminton.

A man short!

What was to be done?

"If my husband danced it wouldn't matter so much. Or if it had been one of the girls," Mrs. Mabbit lamented. "Can you suggest any-one, Miss Collett? Do you think either of your brothers? . . . at such short notice . . ."

"Hugh might if he isn't dancing anywhere else. He'd love it. Can I telephone a wire to the post office? Reply paid? Then we might hear to-night."

And by dinner-time the clerk at the exchange at Frampton Massey had telephoned out that Captain Collett was "Delighted; please meet train 5.45."

"It's rather a shame to have asked you and only me here," Mrs. Mabbit said confidentially, when they were having their coffee after dinner. "I *did* think Mr. Mabbit would have been here by dinner-time, but there was a directors' meeting at Coventry and he couldn't get back to-night. I hope you don't mind an evening alone with me."

"I think it was awfully kind of you to ask me before the others, and do let me help you if there are any odd jobs to be done."

"You've helped me already, getting your brother to come all in a hurry like that. I just felt when I wrote, if anything goes wrong Miss Collett'll stand by me. I'm awfully nervous, you know. It's the first really big house-party we've had; and Mr. Mabbit, with the best will in the world, isn't much use, he's so retiring."

"Don't you think the more people there are the easier it is?—because they amuse each other. There's the ball to-morrow night—they won't any of them come much before dinner—and there's the meet at the Cross Roads on Wednesday morning. Are you giving any of them a mount?"

"Well, Miss Collett, that's what rather bothers me. You see, neither I nor Mr. Mabbit ride. We keep a pony for the grass, and the boys can ride on it when they're at home, but all the rest we do with motors. We've got three, and the Ford for messages and luggage. It didn't seem much use to keep horses as well."

"They're not very fond of motors at meets," Susan said, "not if they try to follow, it spoils the scent so."

"There's Voisey in Frampton Massey. I believe he's got quite a lot of horses this season, and I know Mr. Mabbit would be delighted to hire for any of them."

"Are they hunting people who are coming?"

"To tell you the truth, Miss Collett, I don't

know much about any of them except my own nieces, the Miss Harrowbys. They've asked most of them. At least, they told me who to write to. My nieces go out a lot in London, and are very fond of society. Violet's considered quite a beauty, and she's a wonderful dancer. But I'll tell you all who's coming, and perhaps you'll know some of them."

Susan, however, knew none of them, and prayed inwardly they might not all prove as terrible as they sounded.

"I've had a most worrying day," Mrs. Mabbit said plaintively, "and to crown all, Mrs. Shortly—you know Mrs. Shortly, her husband's one of the curates at the Abbey in Frampton Massey—well, they both called this afternoon and stayed hours. They'd only *just* gone when you arrived."

Mrs. Mabbit paused expectantly.

"I remember them perfectly," Susan said, wondering what on earth Mrs. Mabbit wanted her to say, "though, of course, we didn't see much of them—we youngsters, I mean."

"Well, I consider she's a most interfering sort of woman. What do you suppose she came out here for this afternoon? Mind, I don't blame him. He has to do what he's told—anyone can see that."

"What did she interfere about?"

"Well, she came out here—hired a motor to do it too; that's why I couldn't let them go without tea, for I don't fancy they're very well off—just to tell me that I was making it quite impossible for anyone in Frampton Massey to get servants."

"But why you? You're not in Frampton Massey."

"No, but this week I've got two extra housemaids, both girls in the town, and they asked for a pound a week, and as it was only just *for* the week, I gave it them. In Coventry we shouldn't get them for that either, even though they aren't particularly good."

"But how did she know?"

"You may well ask. But it seems to me in a little place like this people know *everything*—every single thing you do or say or spend or eat."

"But it wasn't any business of hers."

"Of course it wasn't, but there she sat as if she was Queen Victoria and scolded me, regularly scolded me. And it hurt a bit, for of all things I'd hate to do is to make things harder for people who haven't much money just because Mr. Mabbit happens to have made a good deal, and he feels just the same. He often says to me, 'Emily, it's come to us, let's do what good we can with it,' and we do try."

"I'm sure you do, and what's more, you succeed. I shouldn't let that ridiculous Mrs. Shortly worry you—and one must remember it is awfully hard to get servants just now."

"I know it is, no one better, but it hurts, Miss Collett. All these pictures of fat people lolling in motors, and Mr. Mabbit thin as a rake and so conscientious, and with a weak digestion so that he can't take anything but the plainest food. And as for motors, he hates them; he'd rather go in a bus or the mouldiest old cab any day, but we must have something to get about in, and he hates horses worse."

"No one, dear Mrs. Mabbit, could ever think you were in the least like the profiteers in the comic papers."

Susan spoke with absolute sincerity. Mrs. Mabbit was as thin as her husband. Her face was lined and anxious, and her good clothes always looked as if someone had given them a vicious tweak and pulled them all awry.

"Mind, if I'd known what Mrs. Shortly told me before I engaged those girls, I wouldn't have given them a penny more than eighteen shillings and their tax. But I didn't know, so I can't see why she went on at me so."

"What did Mr. Shortly say?"

"Oh, he tried to pass it off as a joke. They say he spends his life patching up what she's

broken or torn. But there, I mustn't fret about it any more. Would Captain Collett like a mount on Wednesday, do you think?"

"He'd love it if he's brought his hunting things, but I don't expect he has."

"You send him a wire first thing in the morning and tell him to bring them. If you write it to-night, Palmer'll telephone it in first thing tomorrow morning. I do want him to enjoy himself."

II

"I said you were in, 'm, and the young lady's in the drawing-room and here's her card."

Mrs. Stowe took the card from her parlourmaid, but she had mislaid her spectacles. "Who is it, Doris?" she asked. "Read it for me."

"Miss Susan Collett, and there's Empress Club in the corner and an address scratched out."

"Oh!" Mrs. Stowe said, rather breathlessly, "oh, all right, Doris. I'll go in a minute. You needn't wait."

The girl went to the door, looking curiously at her mistress, who still sat in the big leather chair staring in front of her.

Presently Mrs. Stowe pulled herself up by the arms and slowly crossed the room, still staring

as though she walked in her sleep. She bumped herself against the edge of the table, but even that could not displace the vision before her eyes of a doorway with white steps leading to it, with Hesper's little figure at the top and Hesper's eager, admiring eyes gazing spellbound at a handsome, imperious child who thumped at the knocker till the street resounded.

"Susan Collett." How once upon a time that name was ever in her ears, and now—now when it was all no use—here was the girl in her house; come, doubtless, because of Alfrey's engagement to her cousin.

She pulled herself together with a sigh, and, moving softly, she crossed the little hall. Doris had omitted to shut the drawing-room door, and she pushed it open without a sound.

Susan was standing with her back to it before the fireplace, gazing at a large framed photograph of Hesper that hung above it.

She heard someone and turned with outstretched hand. "I'm Julia Mainwaring's cousin," she said, "and as I'm staying for a few days at Aylberne, she thought you would allow me to call. I've met your son, Mrs. Stowe, with Julia."

"Very kind of you, I'm sure, Miss Collett. Please take a seat. I used to know you very well by sight when you were a little girl, but we

haven't seen much of you lately in these parts. You haven't changed much, now I come to look at you closer."

"I've come down for the ball. Mrs. Mabbitt—they've got the Manor now, you know—kindly asked me."

"Ah, you're fond of dancin'; quite right too while you're young. Now, Alfrey. . . . What do you think of my son, Miss Collett?"

"You're awfully proud of him, I'm sure," Susan said, dimpling; and Mrs. Stowe noticed the dimples, whatever Alfrey might do.

"You've read his books, I suppose?"

"You mustn't expect me to discuss his books. I'm not clever like Julia."

"I'm not clever either, Miss Collett, not that way, though I'm no fool, if I do say it as shouldn't. But it's always been a puzzle to me how I came to have the children I have had. My little girl—wonder if you happen to remember my little girl?"

"Remember Hesper? As if anyone could forget Hesper, and I loved her so dearly."

Susan spoke with such convincing sincerity that Mrs. Stowe produced her handkerchief and blew her nose noisily.

"It was my first acquaintance with real grief when she died," Susan continued, speaking low and fast, "a dreadful shock to me. I've always

wanted you to know. . . . I came to see her after we got back from Scotland, the summer holidays, and the maid said——”

“They never told me you’d called,” Mrs. Stowe interrupted. “I wish I’d known. There were little things of hers . . . I’d like to have given you something. . . .”

“Did she ever talk of me?” Susan asked.

“Ever talk of you! Why, the child could talk of nothing else. It was Susan this and Susan that every minute of the day. . . . Queer that we should meet like this after all these years.”

“I’ve always wanted to come, but I couldn’t seem to find a reason before. . . . But now that we’re going to be sort of relations . . . and Julia thought I might.”

“And a very kind thought it was,” Mrs. Stowe said heartily. “And we mustn’t be down-hearted, not the very first time we meet—Alfrey wouldn’t like it. He never was one for showing his feelings. Now tell me, just between you and me, how did you like Alfrey’s last book?”

“Very much, but some of it seemed difficult to me.”

Mrs. Stowe nodded her head and screwed up her eyes. “Shall I tell you something in confidence? I like a story to *be* a story—like that Miss Dell

writes. I do like a masterful man in a book, a man ready with his fists and his horsewhip. That's the sort of man pleases me . . . in a book. Now Alfrey's people seem just like what one can see any day in the High Street here. Nothing out of the common at all. Yet the papers—they make ever such a fuss of him, so I suppose it's all right.

"You wouldn't really like a man who rushed round horsewhipping people, you know—think of the summonses and things."

"Perhaps not, but I do love scenes and to-dos in books, and I like to read about good-lookin' people, and my little girl was just the same. First question she'd ask about anybody was, 'Is he handsome?' 'Is she pretty?' She got that from me. A regular weakness I call it. Alfrey's not like that."

"I expect Mr. Stowe cares more about brains."

"Is that what attracted him in your cousin?"

"Probably, but Julia's considered very good-looking too, you know."

"Are you very fond of her, Miss Collett?"

"Yes; we've always been great friends."

"She frightens me," Mrs. Stowe confessed. "She frightens me something awful. I've only seen her once. . . ."

"You mustn't be frightened of Julia. She's not a bit alarming really. She's reserved, perhaps,

and sometimes a bit superior, but she's a very good sort really, and most affectionate. You'll be very fond of Julia by and by, I know you will."

"I hope so, I'm sure," Mrs. Stowe said, rather dubiously. "But to return to the masterful man—when you marry yourself, wouldn't you like your husband to be one that wanted his own way?"

"Not in the least. Nothing would induce me to marry a masterful man. I've seen too much of it in our family. People who want their own way in everything are generally obstinate and selfish and rather stupid."

"Well, to be sure!" Mrs. Stowe exclaimed. "There's no uncertain sound about you."

"Not about that," Susan laughed. "One of my uncles was what you'd call a masterful man. No one in the family could call her soul her own. My aunt and my two cousins always looked exactly like a field in a wet August the day after a fête."

"And do they still?"

"No, for he died a year ago, and though he left the most tiresome and complicated will in the world, they're not the same people. They're quite cheerful and intelligent now."

"Was he a Collett?" Mrs. Stowe asked anxiously.

"No; he was my mother's eldest brother."

"I'm a bit masterful myself," Mrs. Stowe said thoughtfully, "but I hope I'm not obstinate and selfish. Do I look it, Miss Collett?"

"Not in the least, and I'm sure you are neither one nor the other."

"Tell me," Mrs. Stowe said, leaning forward in her chair, "are you engaged?"

"No."

"Was he killed in the war?"

"Who?" Susan asked, and winced, thinking of David.

"Someone you were fond of."

"Not that sort of fondness. I've never been engaged, Mrs. Stowe, though perhaps I've come a bit near it once or twice, but something always seemed to stop me."

"Ah! You're waiting for Mr. Right."

"Perhaps so," Susan said, rising as she spoke, "but I mustn't keep Mrs. Mabbit's car waiting any longer. I promised faithfully to be back for tea, and there are such a lot of people to fetch from the station. I'm so glad I found you at home."

That night his mother wrote to Alfrey about Susan's visit: "Just as simple she was as I am myself. No frills about her nor no pride, and faithful-hearted too she is. She hadn't forgotten

my Hesper that loved her so. And, my good boy, why ever didn't you tell me? Where are your ears? Why, that girl's voice would charm gold from a miser."

CHAPTER XII

I

THE house-party, when it arrived, was very much what Susan had expected, with the exception of Hugh, whom she had not expected at all.

Of the two Miss Harrowbys, Violet was pretty as a pink and common as chickweed, while Eileen, who had no particular looks, went in for being "a good sport," with an ignorance of sport in general and a conscientiousness in discussing nothing else that was apt to be fatiguing to her fellow-creatures. The two young men were very young, complacent, uneducated, and of the post-war type who threaten to be even more unemployable than certain survivals.

Hugh, adorably handsome, gay and charming, directly he got Susan alone for five minutes (he came to her room when they went up to dress for dinner), told her that she'd need to pay his fare back, for he could only raise the single to bring him.

"Look here, Susan," he said "I've got a new

stunt. Why shouldn't I be a 'paid guest' to people like our hosts? There are far too many of the new poor who want to take 'paying guests,' why shouldn't some of us be paid? You and me, now, we're well worth a tenner apiece to these Mabbits. Why should we give 'em our experience and our prestige and our agreeable society for nothing?"

"But they give us the best time they can in exchange."

"I dare say, but 'tisn't a fair exchange. You just hint to Mrs. Mabbit that if she wants me again she must stump up. I'm sure she'd be perfectly willing."

"I've no doubt she would, but I shouldn't be willing. You must remember they're our tenants."

"Fiddle-de-dee! *Our* tenants!—they're father's tenants. We don't get anything out of it."

"Oh, yes, we do. At least you, certainly, do. You couldn't keep your green jacket for a month if the Manor wasn't let."

"Well, have it as you like. But I think we ought to get more out of that good lady than the mere visit."

"She's awfully kind, Hugh."

"A bit blurred and bleating though, isn't she? I can't stick plaintive people. What sort of a gee have they got for me to-morrow?"

"You may depend it will be the best mount they can raise. Be nice to her, Hugh, she means so well."

"Did you ever know me other than nice to people?"

"No. You're generally a dear, but you seem to put these poor Mabbits on a different plane. . . ."

"Well, hang it all, they *are* on a different plane. You think of my scheme. It's a sound business proposition. We might go into partnership and make pots of money. Robert wouldn't be in it with us if we did. You think it over."

The ball was a good ball. Before dinner Hugh made a bee-line for Miss Violet Harrowby, and in three minutes they were thick as thieves, and he danced with her almost every dance. The first fox-trot, however, he danced with Susan, "just to show 'em," he said, and they met so many old friends that Susan's card was full and all the extras promised before she had been five minutes in the ballroom. She faithfully kept the dances she had promised to her fellow-guests; and, as Mrs. Mabbit had hoped, handed on as many men as were complaisant to the Miss Harrowbys. She even sat out one dance with Mr. Mabbit, who said nothing at all, but smiled kindly upon her and appeared to enjoy her society in his own

remote and taciturn way. After that he and Mrs. Mabbit went off and played bridge for the rest of the evening.

Next day Hugh was the only member of the party who followed the hounds. Susan had refused a mount that she might persuade the others to walk to the meet, for she knew the master, and feared his wrath should the Aylberne house-party attempt to follow in cars. She took them by a short cut through exceedingly muddy lanes, and Miss Violet Harrowby's scarlet sandals with their two-inch heels suffered considerably.

The second ball was very like the first, and Susan enjoyed herself; but all the time was conscious that she was waiting for something or somebody.

It was a curious, indefinable feeling. She couldn't explain it, nor could she dismiss it. Yet nothing happened. The anticipated, unknown something or someone never materialized, and she went back to Hatfield to exercise Bingo and to help Aunt Myrtle move to Hove, having faithfully promised the Mabbits to return for the point-to-point races at the end of March.

II

A week later Alfrey persuaded Julia to come down with him to Frampton Massey to dine and

sleep, and to meet Aunt Claire, who was again staying with his mother.

Mrs. Stowe was much flustered at the prospect. The spare bedroom was polished and dusted and arranged and rearranged. The finest linen was looked out, the largest and softest towels. Rain-water was strained and put in the jugs and a vase of snowdrops placed upon the dressing-table.

Aunt Claire was to share her sister's room, with the little dressing-room that had been Hesper's to keep her things in. That little room would never have held Aunt Claire herself.

Dinner was rather a solemn meal. Perfectly cooked, well served, and exceedingly good. Mrs. Stowe would have been so grateful if Julia had only praised something, perhaps had a second helping of one dish. Mrs. Stowe's guests nearly always praised the food; partly because it really was most excellent, and partly because, if they were at all sympathetic, they realized how much it pleased their hostess.

But Julia was accustomed to good cooking, and food at the best of times didn't particularly interest her. Just then, too, she was really making a great effort not to show how bored she felt, and with what apprehension she was looking forward to the long evening before her. The æons of ages that must pass before those two fat

old women would go to bed and leave her alone with Alfrey!

She was bent upon carrying out Susan's advice. She honestly wanted to be kind to Alfrey's extraordinary relatives and to please him. But Aunt Claire had been something of a shock, and her sense of humour was not developed in any direction that could include amusement at Aunt Claire's oddities.

Aunt Claire was so arch; so twinkling; so full of sly hints and innuendoes; so firmly determined that the dinner should be a success; that the diners should be merry and bright, and that the young people should feel that they might bask in the sympathetic approval of their elders.

Aunt Claire worked hard, but it was uphill work.

Julia had hoped that she and Alfrey might be left alone for coffee and cigarettes in the little dining-room with its bow window, fumed-oak sideboard, and chairs upholstered in faded pillar-box red. But no, they were expected to accompany the elder ladies to the drawing-room, and, as Aunt Claire "liked her whiff," were graciously bidden to smoke there.

Julia was wearing a "Paris model" in black panne, sleeveless, severely plain, the only touch of colour a long chain of amber beads and amber combs in her fair hair.

Alfrey was intensely conscious of how beautiful she looked. How distinguished. How exquisite was her line, austere slender and virginal. She seemed, and was, whole worlds away from the two portly, flushed old ladies, seated together, on the Chesterfield drawn up beside the fire.

And the sophisticated simplicity of Julia's appearance added to instead of diminishing the mystery and complexity of her atmosphere.

Even her lips, Aunt Claire observed, were untouched by lip-stick, and her clear pallor unrelieved by the faintest film of rouge.

"Skinny, I call her," thought Aunt Claire, "skinny and cold as ice, but there's no doubt she's got style."

"Oh, Lord," Mrs. Stowe prayed inwardly, "don't let me say nothing that will annoy her. And yet I know I shall. Oh, Lord, please don't let me."

Julia leant back in her chair, graceful, composed, silent; her grave eyes fixed upon the clock.

And it was only half-past eight.

"Are you interested in opera, Miss Mainwaring?" Aunt Claire asked abruptly.

"There hasn't been much of late years, has there?"

Julia's voice was smooth, courteous, and yet seemed to shut that conversational opening with a slam.

Aunt Claire pushed it ajar again: "But you were going to the theatre before the war, surely?"

"Of course I was. I'm twenty-eight—but with the exception of the Wagner cycles and . . ."

"I'm not talking of grand opera," Aunt Claire interrupted, "light opera's what I was interested in. Comic opera—before musical comedy pushed them all off the stage."

"You sang, I believe," Julia said politely.

"I sang in 'Les Cloches' and 'Madame Favert' and 'Olivette,' and I played Letty Lind's parts on tour in 'The Circus Girl' and 'The Shop Girl,' and just at the end of my time, when I was too fat for lead, I played Lady Jane in 'Patience' on tour. They had to put it up for me. I never had a star part in London. D'you play the piano at all, my dear?"

"Julia is an admirable musician," Alfrey interposed, "and one of the best accompanists in London."

"Well, then, perhaps she'll favour us," Aunt Claire suggested. "The piano was tuned last week. I suppose you know some pieces by heart, my dear?"

Julia glanced at the clock.

Twenty minutes to nine.

It would be easier to play than to talk to them, even if the piano were horrible, as it probably was. She rose, slender and elegant and curiously

exotic in the comfortable little room whose furniture had nearly all been bought at the very worst Victorian period.

Alfrey opened the piano, and she sat down on the square stool that screwed up and down and had a box for music underneath it.

She let her long hands fall lightly on the keys.

Wonders of wonders! the piano was not so bad. A cottage Broadwood, not powerful, but sweet and tuneful.

She played Hungarian dances and some Grieg and a Chopin nocturne or two. "Nice, obvious tune-y things," Julia thought to herself, and her audience was enthralled and enthusiastic.

"I suppose," Aunt Claire suggested, almost humbly, "you couldn't play bits from any of my old operas?"

"I'm afraid I haven't heard them. You don't happen to have any of the music here, do you?"

"Why, we've got them all," Mrs. Stowe exclaimed, "upstairs. She never sang in any piece but I went and bought the score. You run upstairs, Alfrey, and you'll find them all as neat as neat in the box-room. You'd better take a candle, for there's no light there."

Alfrey returned with a great armful of comic operas, and for the next hour Julia worked really hard, and probably gave more genuine pleasure than she had ever given in her life before.

Song after song she played, and kept herself so well in hand that Aunt Claire's constant humming, interspersed with reminiscences, didn't succeed in putting her off.

As the clock struck ten Mrs. Stowe rose.

"Well, my dear, you've given us a great treat, but we mustn't tire you, and I expect you are ready for bed. I'll just come up with you and see that you've got everything."

Julia gave one despairing glance at Alfrey and he came to the rescue: "If you and Aunt Claire are tired, Mother, don't you bother to sit up, and I'll bring Julia up presently. We don't keep such early hours in London, you know; Julia wouldn't sleep if she went to bed yet."

Alfrey stood at the door, holding it open. Mrs. Stowe looked dubious. Aunt Claire giggled. "Come along, Emma," she said, "they've had enough of us for to-night. Good night, young people; don't sit up too awfully late."

She swept her portly sister through the door and shut it noisily behind her.

Julia over by the fire held out her arms to Alfrey and sighed, "At last!"

Upstairs Aunt Claire was standing in front of the mirror with a bottle of face-cream in one hand and a dab of cotton-wool in the other, removing her complexion.

"Extraordinary," she remarked to her sister, "how the human face collects dirt even in the country. Just look at this wool!"

Mrs. Stowe over at the washstand grunted. "There's more than dirt on that dab of cotton-wool, and I always maintain, Claire, that if you'd wash your face with plain soap and water, your skin'd look a sight better than it does."

"No soap shall touch my face," Aunt Claire protested, "while I've strength left in my hands to clean it properly myself. *You* may choose to go about shining like a china mug. . . . I'd rather be dull than shiny any day. And if you ask me, that girl of Alfrey's would be all the better for a touch of colour."

Mrs. Stowe turned from the washstand, tooth-brush in hand, to watch her sister diligently plying a fresh dab of cotton-wool. "She's a most accomplished girl, isn't she?"

"Most accomplished," Aunt Claire agreed, carefully undarkening her eyelashes.

Mrs. Stowe finished washing her teeth and came forward to the dressing-table.

"You think she's a nice girl, don't you, Claire?" she asked anxiously. "You think she'll be kind to Alfrey?"

"There you go again with your 'kind,' Emma. Anyone with half an eye can see she's head over ears in love with Alfrey."

"And him with her."

There was a new note of anxiety in Mrs. Stowe's voice. "You think he's the same for her, Claire?"

Aunt Claire, looking like the stout ghost of herself, turned to face her sister. "Now, there you've got me," she said. "He *thinks* he's in love with her, but it's my belief she's done most of the courting all along."

"I should call him most devoted," Mrs. Stowe retorted, almost huffily.

"You haven't had the experience I've had, Emma. Crazy about me I've had them, and you can't say Alfrey's that."

"Alfrey never was one to show his feelin's."

"If he was fathoms deep in love, he'd show his feelings like any other man. The more reserved a chap is, the more he shows if he's really in love. It's all tommy nonsense about 'reserve' and that in love-affairs. Therefore I say, and I *do* know something about love-making, *and* men, he's only got it light—as yet."

III

Alfrey, with that dreadful power of divination granted to those who have the creative and imaginative faculties highly developed, had read what was passing in Julia's mind during the evening as plainly as if she had written it.

He knew that she had played to the old ladies not so much from a friendly desire to give them pleasure as to protect herself from their conversational importunities, and he was, consequently, less grateful to her than he would have been had her motive been more kindly.

Julia's attitude to his people puzzled him, for he knew that it was not characteristic of the Colletts as a class.

It would never have occurred to one of the Aylberne Colletts that their own position could possibly be jeopardized by being seen in public with anybody else, however odd, shabby, or even disreputable that person might be. Serene in their consciousness of a gentleness that had been an established fact for generations, they were all singularly unself-conscious. Absolutely sure of themselves socially, it never crossed their minds that *they* could be criticized because of their association with anyone of inferior rank.

To be sure, they kept rigidly to that rank in the matter of their personal friends, but once let them accept anyone outside it and he was immediately included.

Alfrey knew that even Aunt Myrtle, did any social exigency require it, would walk down Bond Street with a scavenger in his working clothes, unflurried and practically unaware that there was anything odd in the proceeding.

The small-mindedness that would recognize a person in one environment and cut that person in another was unknown amongst them, and it distressed Alfrey that Julia, with her smattering of subversive political ideals, should fall below the standards of her essentially Tory relatives in this respect.

He had been pleased and rather touched by the frank way in which the huge Collett connection had accepted him without reservation because he was engaged to Julia. And the simplicity and kindness which Sir Godfrey showed in his inquiries after Mrs. Stowe and his expressed desire to make her acquaintance, contrasted unfavourably with Julia's studied avoidance of her as a subject of conversation.

Therefore, when Aunt Claire next morning announced her intention of coming with them in the hired motor to the station "to see them off," he made no attempt to dissuade her.

Aunt Claire knew perfectly well that Julia would prefer not to be seen with her in public, and therefore she was fully determined to come.

Aunt Claire was a born tease.

The 10.20 train to town from Frampton Massey is the best train in the day, and Thursday was not a hunting day, so that there was always a sporting chance of encountering people Julia had met at Aylberne.

Neither in manner nor appearance did Aunt Claire's personality lend itself to effacement, and just as her nephew might have mingled with any crowd unnoticed, so Aunt Claire challenged observation and quite naturally took the centre of the stage under the spot light.

This morning, being cold, she wore her most voluminous black furs, that made her look about four feet across, and a hat with an immense osprey that whisked into her neighbour's eye as often as she turned her head.

She had taken a dislike to Julia, saw that she was uncomfortable, and this so raised her spirits that both during the short ride in the motor and during the long wait at the station (hired motors in the country are always far too soon) she kept up an unceasing fire of chaff and arch-retort.

Julia, hoping that it might affect Aunt Claire, speedily relapsed into a dignified silence. But it had just the opposite effect. More and more people arrived upon the platform. Mr. and Mrs. Shortly, who knew Julia slightly, bowed to her with thinly veiled astonishment at her companion. The Bagen-dons from Harthover Castle arrived, and would have exchanged greetings with Julia but that she turned her back upon them hastily and pretended not to see them.

In spite of the extremely cold February day, Julia's cheeks blazed. She looked quite extraor-

dinarily handsome, and Aunt Claire remarked loudly to Alfrey that it was plain how well the air of Frampton Massey suited his sweetheart.

Then there arrived two men, two young men with a soldier servant carrying kit-bags that unmistakably held racing saddles, and Julia's heart went down into her boots, for one of them was her cousin Hugh, and the other Lord William Loveton, a brother officer, with whom she had often danced.

"Hullo, Julia! Hullo, Stowe! I didn't know you were down here or I'd have looked you up. We've been roped in to ride a couple of Wedderburn's horses in the Point-to-Point, and have been trying them on the downs."

Lord William was very nearly as good-looking as Hugh, and without waiting for an introduction, Aunt Claire smiled expectantly upon them, demanding archly: "Now, which of you am I to back?"

Alfrey introduced Hugh to his aunt. Hugh presented Lord William, and both of them instantly answered to their cues, and a merry dialogue followed that disgusted Julia as much as it amused Hugh and Lord William. The train was late. Hugh and Lord William stayed with them till the very last minute, and the group round about Julia was so noisy and hilarious that she could have wished that the earth might open and swallow her up.

Aunt Claire stood waving on the platform till the last vestige of the train vanished into a tunnel. Hugh and his friend were too tactful to travel with Alfrey and Julia, but other people were less considerate, and the six seats in their carriage were all occupied.

"I do hate being seen off, don't you?" Julia said, as they started.

Alfrey looked at her and laughed. "Poor little Julia," he said, "you bore it very well on the whole."

In spite of the other passengers, Julia slipped her hand under his arm and pressed it gently.

"Darling," she whispered, "you know that I'd bear anything if it gave you any pleasure."

The roar of the tunnel drowned Alfrey's answer.

CHAPTER XIII

I

AUNT CLAIRE always maintained that Julia's frigidity at breakfast gave her sister a chill; for the day after Julia and Alfrey went back to town Mrs. Stowe went down with a sharp attack of her old enemy, bronchitis. Thus it came about that when she recovered Aunt Claire carried her off to the Salisbury Hotel at Brighton to pick up. Aunt Claire was fond of Brighton, and always chose that particular hotel because it had been a favourite with the old actor, J. L. Toole.

Julia, serene in the knowledge that she really had tried conscientiously to be nice to Alfrey's very odd relations, was quite unaware that she had been anything but the greatest success; and having, as she put it, "got it over," was able to feel quite forgiving towards both the old ladies. Therefore when Alfred told her of his mother's illness and her move to Brighton, Julia good-naturedly wrote to Susan asking her to look them up.

"You needn't say anything to Aunt Myrtle about their being there unless you like. You've already seen Alfrey's parents, but I warn you that his aunt will be something of a shock. Ask Hugh! He has seen her.

"Poor darling Alfrey is so loyal and sweet to them, but they must be an awful trial. I realize, of course, that I *must* bear with his mother, but I can't see why I should be compelled to endure the aunt. I shan't be in the least offended if he can't feel affection for any of mine. I make him a present of all my aunts (and there are about a dozen of them) to deal with as he thinks fit. So far as I can make out, and I hope it's the case, he has only this one, but she, my dear Susan, is indeed a host in herself.

"Nevertheless, if you feel virtuous and altruistic, you might take Bingo for a walk along the front and look in on the two old things. It would please Alfrey so much that I should have asked you to do so, and if I can tell Father you've done it, *he* will be pleased with both of us. It's quite funny how dutiful and old-fashioned Father is about people's relations, and yet he is so wonderfully broad-minded and modern about most things. I feel a bore asking you to do this, but you will understand. I dread Alfrey's suggesting that I should go down with him for the day to see them—I'm frightfully busy with clothes, and the little

season is in full swing. Besides, those queer old ladies in any public place would really be the limit. Alfrey is sure to go down, but he too is worked to death with one thing and another just now. Did I tell you that he has given up his post on *Orion*? He feels, and so do I, that he ought to devote himself entirely to creative work, and that what time he can spare from his novel belongs to ME. I wish you could get engaged too, Susan. It is so lovely.

“Let me know if you see those two old oddities when you call, and how you fare. Mind, I don’t forbid you to tell Aunt Myrtle that they’re in Brighton. If she could be induced to ask them to lunch, say, it would be something for me to swank about to Alfrey, but I leave that entirely to your discretion.

“Love from JULIA.”

Susan did not hesitate for a moment as to the proper course for her to take with regard to Alfrey’s relatives. She instantly determined not only that she herself would call upon the old ladies but that Aunt Myrtle should call with her and ask them both to a meal in Norton Road.

A queer feeling of loyalty to Hesper was at the bottom of this decision, accompanied by a grim sort of gratification at the prospect of forcing her aunt to recognize the very people she had scorned

in the past, when her scorn had been so potent to give pain.

Aunt Myrtle was watering the ferns in a little greenhouse that opened off the drawing-room. Susan followed her with Julia's open letter in her hand.

"I've just had a letter from Julia," she said. "Alfrey's mother and aunt are at the 'Salisbury,' and she'd like us to call. Could you come with me this afternoon?"

"What does Julia say?" Aunt Myrtle asked cautiously, putting down the watering-pot and holding out her hand for the letter.

Susan gave one quick glance at her aunt, saw that her eye-glasses were not fastened just under her collar-bone by their usual chain, and meekly handed over Julia's letter.

Aunt Myrtle felt for her glasses. "How stupid of me! I must have left them on my dressing-table when I changed for lunch. No, don't fetch them now—read me what Julia says."

Susan read aloud a bowdlerized version of Julia's letter.

Aunt Myrtle sighed. "I suppose we must. Tea will do, I think. Not lunch. I should have minded more had we been living at Aylberne. I believe that Mrs. Stowe is quite a good sort of person—most useful in the Women's Institute—and I heard she was really wonderful at the

hospital during the war, superintended all the cooking; and the men, and, what was quite as important, the nurses, were all admirably fed, even in the most difficult time. After I heard it I often wished we'd had her with us. I had such a lot of trouble with the cooks. We needn't stay more than a quarter of an hour. We might do it tomorrow afternoon, early, and I'll ask them to tea on Sunday. Poor Julia!"

"Why do you say 'poor Julia,' Aunt Myrtle? She's awfully happy."

"I'm always sorry for young women who marry out of their own class. It's all very well now, but how does she know what tiresome tricks she may discover in the intimacy of married life? For all she knows, he may bite his nails, or pick his teeth, or sniff, or not like baths and be stingy about his under-clothes. He comes of the class that wears detachable cuffs (and I'm sure I don't blame them, with laundry at its present price), and it's impossible that Julia can have found out any of these things yet."

Susan laughed, but at the same time felt nettled. "I've met Alfrey Stowe," she said, "and he didn't seem to me likely to do any of the things you mention."

"Well, well, we'll hope not. I *earnestly* hope not, for poor dear Julia's sake. Poor dear Julia!"

II

Alfrey was anxious about his mother. Lately, each time she had had bronchitis she had taken longer to recover, and every attack seemed to leave her older, more husky, and more wheezy; weaker, and with less recuperative power. He had met the old ladies at Paddington and seen them across London and into their train at Victoria, and had been shocked by his mother's appearance.

That was on Tuesday, and, beyond a post-card from Aunt Claire announcing their safe arrival and that their rooms were comfortable, he had heard nothing. On Thursday morning he decided to go down to Brighton and see for himself how his mother was. He didn't ring them up to say he was coming. Nor did he ring up Julia to ask if she would go with him, for he was well aware that a visit from him accompanied by Julia would not, at present, be an unalloyed pleasure to his mother. Knowing how weak she was, he felt he ought to spare her as much as possible.

He realized that his aunt was antagonistic to Julia. Indeed, she made but small effort to conceal her feelings; and this, naturally, caused a strong reaction in Julia's favour.

Aunt Claire was absurd.

He was fond of her, but he would stand no nonsense.

As to his mother, her case was different. He was assured that she was ardently desirous of loving Julia, if Julia would allow herself to be loved. He read his mother's mind just as clearly as he read Julia's. And because in it he found no criticism, only a pathetic anxiety not to give offence and a real desire to understand what, so far, had proved incomprehensible, so did his thoughts about his mother increase in tenderness.

Had she been critical, had she been in the least mother-in-lawish and disposed to find fault with Julia, or with his taste in choosing Julia, instantly he would have been on the defensive and Julia's champion. It was because he knew his mother wanted him to be happy in his own way, not hers, that Alfrey was quick to resent even an implied slight upon her.

It was because Julia was so strongly entrenched behind her brilliant youth, her social position, her good looks, her knowledge of the world, that he dared even in his most secret heart to criticize her attitude towards his mother. It seemed to him ungenerous that, when she had so much, she should be unwilling to step down a little way from her high throne of self-sufficiency to meet the older, simpler woman.

As the train rattled him down to Brighton that sunny February morning these questions asked themselves over and over again in his mind, and

ever like a refrain crystallized into the question: "If she loves me so much—how is it that she doesn't understand?"

He had not yet learned to ask himself: "If I loved her enough wouldn't I try to make her understand?"

III

He got to Brighton at midday and drove straight to the Salisbury Hotel.

"Yes, the ladies were in; at least they were sitting in the balcony outside the lounge enjoying the sunshine."

There they were in the balcony above the little square green garden that separates the hotel from the bustle of the King's Road.

Two large old ladies much muffled and befurred in two basket chairs, their feet on footstools, their hands in muffs, and railway rugs over their knees.

Alfrey drew up a chair beside his mother and prepared to enjoy the sunshine too. She looked better already, he thought. Her dear plain, large face less tired and limp. Her eyes brighter, though the keen wind—or was it the sunshine?—seemed to make them a bit watery.

Alfrey took off his gloves and spread out his cold hands to the sunshine.

Mrs. Stowe captured one of them and drew it

into her muff. She had no gloves on, and her hands were warm. Nobody could see what she had done. Alfrey left his hand in her keeping just as if he had been six years old, and for Mrs. Stowe just then the rather scrubby little garden of the Salisbury Hotel was transformed to a place of dazzling beauty in a world that was all sunshine and beneficence. She was a glad, proud woman: for her son, this wonderful young man who could take words and bend them to his will so that they were instantly transformed into people, real people, who made you glad and sorry and angry and pleased—this wonderful young man, her son, had come, unasked, all that long way, just to have lunch with her and to see for himself how she was going on.

Claire, seemingly, was right. Nothing and nobody could take him away from her if she loved him enough, and kept off being a nuisance or worrying.

Perhaps, presently, even that Julia of his would see that she meant well—and for the present . . . Never was prouder, happier woman than Mrs. Stowe, fondling this wonderful young man's hand within the safe shelter of her muff.

"You'll never guess," Aunt Claire said archly, "you'll never guess who's been to see us. We've had callers, young man, callers—and we're asked out to tea."

"Now, what will you bet, Aunt Claire, that I don't guess right the very first time?"

"Has Julia said anything?"

"That's got nothing to do with it. Do you take me on?"

"Mind, I said callers. Not one—*callers*."

"Well, then, I believe your callers were both Miss Colletts. Did they come together or singly?"

"They came together."

"And were most pleasant," Mrs. Stowe said, eagerly squeezing Alfrey's hand in the muff. "I couldn't have believed that proud-looking Miss Collett could be so neighbourly. I was terrified of her, but she talked so pleasant all about the Women's Institute and the Extension Lectures and the Council Schools—she's on the Education Committee—and ever so many things down there, and you can see how she loves every stone in Frampton Massey and Aylberne, for all she looks so stand-off."

"Now, which Miss Collett are you talking about?" Alfrey asked.

"Why, the aunt, of course," Aunt Claire struck in. "Duchessy old thing, looks as if she'd swallowed the poker. I got off with the girl, and a jolly nice girl too; voice a bit like Ellen Terry's in her best days. Pity she's got such an appalling name."

"Why, what's the matter with her name?"

Alfrey demanded. "I think it's a capital name, dignified and simple. There have been generations of Susans in the Collett family, and they're proud of it."

"I'm sure I hope if you and Julia have a daughter you won't call her Susan—Susan Stowe would sound awful."

"I think Susan Stowe sounds splendid," Alfrey said; and then, for no reason whatever, felt himself colour up to the roots of his hair.

Luckily neither of the old ladies was looking at him, but at some commotion on the front.

Aunt Claire put up her starers. She badly needed spectacles or eye-glasses, and would have neither because she thought they looked dowdy.

"Talk of the devil!" she exclaimed. "There is that very Susan, and, as far as I can make out, her dog's stolen a little boy's ball and gone into the sea with it. Don't you hear him yelling?"

Alfrey rose. "Perhaps I'd better go and see if I can help her," he said.

IV

There was quite a commotion on the front. A small child of Israel in a white fur coat was bawling at the top of his voice, "I want my ballee," while Susan, his nurse, and half a dozen strangers all shouted together at a black retriever who was

gaily breasting the waves with a bright green india-rubber ball in his mouth.

Presently he swam back again and dashed into the midst of the crowd, shaking himself so vigorously that his pursuers scattered on every side. Only Susan braved the shower of spray, sternly commanding Bingo to "drop it." But Bingo, encouraged by the noise, the crowd, and the general excitement, evidently thought it was a game got up for his special edification. Therefore, ignoring Susan's admonitions, and carefully keeping just out of her reach, he darted and turned and twisted about that bit of shore, dropping the ball for a moment and rolling it in front of him, only to snatch it up again in his jaws before any of his pursuers could possibly reach it.

Bingo was thoroughly enjoying himself.

It is possible that he would have obeyed Susan could he have heard her; but every one called to him at the same time, and above all these confused, discordant outcries sounded the eternally reiterated wail of the little Jew-boy, "I want my ballee."

Alfrey, who liked dogs much better than children, as he joined the chase, bent down over the wailing infant to say in a deep and awful voice, "Don't make so much noise."

The startled child gave one glance upwards,

ceased to cry, and rushed to clutch at his nurse's skirts before he recovered sufficient breath to start his lament again.

Susan was getting angry. She had had too much to do with dogs to tolerate disobedience; and Bingo, had he looked at her, would have realized she meant business by the way she gripped the whip-leash in her hand.

She was splashed from head to foot with seawater, and she barely greeted Alfrey when he appeared, beyond saying: "If they'd only leave him alone, I could get the wretched ball directly."

Bingo returned from his swim and started to shake himself afresh. Susan made a dash at him and grasped his collar.

Bingo dropped the ball at her feet and panted, looking up at her in smiling expectation of praise.

"He ought to be thrashed," she said wrathfully; "but it's not vice, only mischief. Still, he *must* do what's he's told. Take the whip, will you?—and I'll smack him."

From long experience of foxhound puppies, Susan knew just how to smack a young dog so that it stung without really hurting.

When she'd done with Bingo, he was yelping and she rather breathless and flushed.

Alfrey, standing by helplessly holding the whip, was rather shocked by the vigour of her correction.

"I wish you could give a little of that to the

horrid child," he murmured. "I'd have *eaten* his ball if I'd been Bingo."

The child was now screaming again: "Nasty dog took my ballee, nasty dog, nasty dog, nasty lady, nasty, nasty man!"

A meek and dripping Bingo was now securely leashed, and Susan drew on her gloves again.

"You always appear unexpectedly and in the strangest places," she said, not over graciously. "Is Julia with you?"

"No, I'm alone. Just come down to lunch with my mother, and, seeing your predicament from the balcony, I wondered if I could be of any use. Won't you come into the hotel and let us dry you?"

"I can't. I shall be late for lunch as it is. I'll never bring him so far down the front again, where there are so many people. He's perfectly good if only he isn't flustered. He's only a puppy, really—not a year old. What's that little boy crying for still? He's got his ball, and it isn't a penny the worse."

"If I were Bingo I'd bite that child."

"Well, then, you *would* get a thrashing. Poor little wretch! Bingo had no right to take his ball."

"In a matter of this kind I agree with Rob Roy, 'let him take who has the power and let him keep who can.' Mayn't I give a ball to Bingo?"

"He's got a ball, thank you, but I don't bring it to the shore—only on the downs."

"You take him on the downs?"

"Nearly always. This is the first time I've brought him down so far, and it'll be the last."

They were walking quite fast towards Hove as they talked, and had reached the King Edward Memorial.

"You must go back," Susan said. "Give my love to Mrs. Stowe, and tell her we look forward to seeing her and Mrs. Cayley on Sunday. Will you be here?"

"I fear not. I go back this afternoon, and on Sunday I go to Woodlands, but I shall come down once more and stay the night. Will you take me on the downs with Bingo one morning?"

Susan had recovered her temper. "I shall be delighted, but it's a good long walk, mind. Would you like to ride?—we can get horses quite easily."

"I'd much rather walk, thank you. It's about the only form of exercise I'm really good at."

"What about Julia? Will she be coming with you?"

"I think not. She's very much engaged just now, and she hates Brighton; she told me so."

"Well, let me know and we'll fix it up. I must fly, for I'm late as it is."

Alfrey watched the tall figure in grey, with the

black dog now trotting decorously by her side, till they were out of sight.

He felt unaccountably cheered and amused. How she had whacked that dog!

Who would believe that adorable voice could have such a heavy hand?

And the dog had licked the hand that whacked him the minute it ceased to whack.

It would be fun to go up on the downs with them both. It would do him good, blow the cobwebs away, make him see more clearly. He'd tell Julia about it, and she could come if she liked—but she wouldn't like. One couldn't associate Julia with dogs and downs.

v

Susan, walking very fast, also felt cheered; and, for no reason at all, rather excited. He was an odd young man, this young man of Julia's. He looked at her so queerly through those spectacles of his . . . as if he saw something that other people didn't see. There was no admiration, as Susan was used to admiration, in the way he looked at her—and yet she was sure he liked her. He seemed to look at her and through her and past her to something behind. . . . Was it the spectacles, she wondered, that made him so different?

She'd tell Julia about his suggestion that she should take him to see the downs. Then if Julia didn't like it, she could easily put a stop to the whole thing. But why should she dislike it?

"She's glad we should be friends," Susan told herself. For although her conscience was a regular dormouse, it did occasionally snore quite shrilly.

"Perhaps he won't come, after all," she thought, as the dormouse conscience gave an extra sharp snore far above the topmost note in the treble stave, right into her ear.

"Why shouldn't I be friends with him?"

What possible harm could there be in going for a walk on the downs?

Susan decided that she would ask Aunt Myrtle, believing that Aunt Myrtle would speed her on her way. It was an easy method of showing some attention to these strange persons Julia had imported into the family.

Even the mention of Aunt Myrtle didn't wake up the dormouse conscience—but the snore did not abate one jot of its shrillness.

CHAPTER XIV

I

“IT’S wonderful and most gratifying the things they say in the papers about Alfrey’s work,” Mrs. Stowe remarked as she closed the copy of *The Independent Review* that he had sent her. “I wish I could understand a bit better what they mean.”

“I often wish I could understand at all what Alfrey himself means—in his books,” Aunt Claire answered. “There’s nobody’s writings I want to like so much as Alfrey’s, but between you and me, the last year or two they’ve bored me stiff, and that’s a fact.”

They were sitting in one of the glass-ended shelters on the front. They’d been a week at Brighton, and Mrs. Stowe had gained in strength and cheerfulness every day.

“Nothing Alfrey could say or do or write could bore me,” she declared firmly, “but I will confess I get a bit puzzled and muddled sometimes, and I wish he’d show a bit more whether *he* likes a person or not. It would be such a help. But he never does.”

"Look at that last book of his," Aunt Claire continued, "*A Divided Interest*, all about a dull little bookseller in a country town with a dull, shabby little shop without so much as a proper window and half the books on a shelf sticking out on the pavement—who can care twopence about that sort of man?"

"He's real enough, though, Claire; you must confess that."

"Who wants him to be real? You can get real people like that any day you choose to walk down the Charing Cross Road. I don't want people I can see for myself, in books—I want something different. I'll tell you what I like: I like a beautiful heroine with lovely clothes that show plenty of her, and for choice I prefer her to be as wicked as a weasel. And a magnificent hero, over six feet if he's an inch, who goes the pace all night and plays polo all day and always looks like a Greek god. And they love each other like hell, and that's about all they do do. And plenty of descriptions of boudoirs and clothes and shoes, 'long narrow feet' she always has, and so has he; and there's quantities of flowers about, and shaded lamps and tiger-skins and things. *Then* I can lose myself and forget I'm a fat old woman inclined to be gouty—but to ask me at my age to feel interested in a dark little bookshop—Well, there's precious little I wouldn't do for

Alfrey, but upon my soul I can't do that."

"I'm afraid I like that sort of book too," Mrs. Stowe confessed, "but Alfrey says it has no relation to life—or is it 'is'?"

"Who wants a book to be a relation? Relations are nearly always tiresome, and as for in-laws . . . and I've had some experience with them, having had three sets."

"Alfrey seems to like his in-laws."

"You always like 'em before you're married. It's afterwards that's the test. Not that I ever saw much of mine. That's one advantage of being on tour—you can't be stuck down in the same town with the same set of people year in year out."

"I can't get over it yet," Mrs. Stowe said meditatively, "Alfrey's Julia being related to the Colletts. That out of all the girls in London he should have pitched on that particular one."

Aunt Claire said nothing, but started humming a little tune under her breath. Mrs. Stowe turned and looked sharply at her. "Why don't you answer, Claire?"

"As for choosing, Emma, I don't believe any of us get a chance to choose. It's just like as if Fate took us and jumbled us up anyhow in a bag. Free-love or marriage, it's all chance. Life's the dinner, and the man's what you get to drink with it. Claude, my first, was a cocktail, giving

you an appetite he never satisfied. Jimmy, my second, was like the sweet champagne you drink too much of when you're young, because it makes you feel daring and gay, and in the morning you've got a headache and a coated tongue——”

“And what about Matthew Cayley?”

“Oh, he was like Sunday luncheon in a teetotal family—roast beef and apple-tart—very wholesome and satisfying, but not exciting.”

“Anyhow, he was a good husband to you and left you very comfortable.”

“And I was a good wife to him and made him jolly comfortable. What's more, I amused him and took him out of himself. Never tell me, Emma, that I didn't deal square with Matthew Cayley.”

“I'm sure you did, but you oughtn't to hint it was dull.”

“It *was* dull, but by that time I'd got fat and deadly tired of trying not to, and when I married him I knew I needn't try any more, and the blessed relief of comfortable stays and eating everything I fancied more than made up for a bit of dullness. Besides, as religious people would tell you, the Kingdom of God is *within* you—and if you're cheerful by nature, cheerful you'll be, whether your circumstances are dull or exciting. We've always been cheerful, Emma, no matter what

happened; and we always will be cheerful, because it's 'within' us."

"I hope so," Mrs. Stowe said, without much conviction. I'm sure I hope so. Would you call Alfrey's Julia cheerful, now, or not?"

"She don't add much to my gaiety," Aunt Claire replied; "but, then, she doesn't like me, and I'm not particularly drawn to her. . . ."

"I'm sorry for that, Claire."

"Perhaps when they're married I shall understand her better," Aunt Claire said hopefully.

"You liked the Colletts, didn't you, when we went to tea?"

"Oh, I can get on all right with that black-eyed Susan, if you mean her."

"Her eyes aren't black, they're brown as brown. Do you call her pretty?"

"She is pretty—there's no question of calling her so."

"It's kind of her to promise to take Alfrey on the downs when he comes to fetch us back, isn't it?"

"If I was that Julia of his, *I* wouldn't have Cousin Susan much about unless I was there to look after her."

"Oh, Claire! I'm positive she's not that sort of girl. Nor is Alfrey at all that sort of man. If I thought there'd be *any* trouble of that kind, I'd beg of Alfrey not to go."

"And if you did you'd be a greater silly than you'd ever been in your life. Don't you move a finger to interfere with Alfrey or Julia or that Susan girl. Let them manage their own affairs. I only said that if I was Julia Mainwaring I'd not go out of *my* way to throw such a pretty cousin in his—that's all."

"I wish, Claire, you wouldn't say things like that. It makes me downright uncomfortable. That it does."

"Don't be frumpy and old-fashioned, Emma. The modern way is to say plop out whatever one thinks, and if I can't speak openly to my own sister——"

"It's you that's old-fashioned over this, Claire," Mrs. Stowe said earnestly. "Just like the people in Frampton Massey, who can't see a boy and girl walk down the street together without saying all sorts of nasty things. Why, since the war . . ."

"You make me tired, Emma, with your 'since the war,' as if the war had changed human nature. Whatever else it's changed, it can never change that. And for you, who've lived more than half your life in that stick-in-the-mud little Wiltshire town, to accuse me of being provincial! Why, I nearly went to America once, and I've been in every big town in England and Scotland *and* Wales."

Aunt Claire was distinctly ruffled, and Mrs. Stowe tactfully changed the subject.

II

“WOODLANDS,

“WIMBLEDON COMMONS, S.W.19.

“*Feb.* 24, 1921.

“DEAR SUSAN,—

“Alfrey is frightfully rushed and asked me to tell you that he is going down to see his people late on Sunday night (it is a bore that he's got to). He'll remain over Monday and take them back with him to town on Tuesday morning. If it's fine, and if you have nothing to do, he says he'll be grateful if you'll fulfil your promise to show him the downs. Do, for the undiluted society of his mamma and aunt all day in that hotel would really be rather too much even for him. I feel guilty not to be going down with him, but I'm always rather tied on Sundays. Daddy is so good I don't want him to feel neglected just because I'm going to be married, and really I couldn't be of any use to Alfrey if we were all day shut up with them. The poor boy is not looking very well, and a little fresh air and some *real* exercise—not pottering about with those old dodders—will freshen him up. When we are married I'll see that he gets proper exercise, but

just now I can do very little. He read me three chapters of his new book last night, and, Susan, it is magnificent. I feel so proud that anyone who can write like that should belong to ME. I always vowed I'd marry someone who would be famous, and now . . . I've done it, I was going to say—I wish I *had* done it. All these delays and restrictions are so very trying, but we'll have a lovely wedding, and I hope for a full page in the *Tatler* in my wedding-dress. When are you coming to us again? I can find plenty for you to do, and I'm sure Aunt Myrtle doesn't really need you—and it does seem absurd that you should have to stay on at Hove just to exercise Hugh's dog. Why doesn't he attend to the creature himself? Remember you've *promised* to come and stay with Dad while Alfrey and I are honeymooning. You'll be able to do what you like all day, but he likes someone to be there when he gets home tired at night. Won't it seem funny to stay at Woodlands and no ME?

“Best love from JULIA.”

“153, NORTON ROAD,

“HOVE.

“*Sunday.*

“DEAR MRS. STOWE,—

“When Cousin Alfrey arrives to-morrow, will you tell him I've heard from Julia and she wants

me to take him for a good walk on the downs on Tuesday morning if it's fine. Perhaps he would call here for Bingo and me about a quarter to ten, then we'll take a train from Hove station to the Dyke and walk from there. One has to walk such a long way here before one comes to any real country.

"I hope your cough has disappeared and that you are feeling much stronger. Kind regards to Mrs. Cayley and you, from yours sincerely,

"SUSAN COLLETT."

"There!" Mrs. Stowe said triumphantly, handing the letter to Aunt Claire. "That'll show you whether there's any hokey-pokey about it. Why, Julia herself asks her."

"More fool Julia!" Aunt Claire snapped. "However, don't say I didn't warn you."

"What do you mean with your warnings? Warn me against what?"

"Time will reveal," Aunt Claire answered, cryptically. "It's not one bit of good for you to act the bread-and-butter miss at your age, Emma. If a young man and a young woman are thrown constantly together (in that bag I spoke of), one of two things happens. Either they get fond of one another or they quarrel."

"But Alfrey and Susan Collett are not thrown constantly together, never have been. I don't believe they've met but twice before."

"And as I said before, if I was Julia I'd take jolly good care they didn't meet a third time without me."

"It shows how she trusts Alfrey."

"In matters of this sort I'd trust a man just as far as I could see him and no farther. Downs, indeed! Catch me sending any young man supposed to be in love with me out on downs with another girl, especially a girl with eyes and ankles like that. Julia Mainwaring is a perfect fool, that's what she is."

"D'you think we ought to go with them, Claire? I wouldn't for the world. . . ."

Aunt Claire burst into laughter. "Sometimes, Emma, you say things that would sound silly in a child of two. Who made you Julia Mainwaring's keeper, pray? Let her look after her own affairs herself."

CHAPTER XV

I

ALFREY breakfasted alone and early at the "Salisbury." The day was fine and the sun shining, so that there could be no question as to the feasibility of the expedition to the downs with Susan. He had slept well and attributed the unusual exhilaration of his spirits to this, and to the fact that his mother was so much better. She had just begun her breakfast in bed when he went to her room to see her before he started.

"How nice you look, Alfrey," she said approvingly. "I do like you in country clothes. I could wish, though, you hadn't got to go off for the whole morning. Not but what I expect the air will do you good. You'll be back for lunch?"

"I expect so, but don't wait a minute for me, as I may be late. It all depends on how far we go."

"Well, don't get lost. It's a beautiful morning for a walk. Don't you wish Julia was with you?"

"I do indeed, but she isn't fond of walking. We must remember she's not nearly so strong as Susan."

Alfrey kissed his mother somewhat hastily and departed. He did not visit Aunt Claire. Lately she had rather got on his nerves, and he was inclined to sympathize with Julia about her. After all, persistent archness *was* very tiring, even when accompanied by a heart of gold. Sometimes hearts of gold were in themselves rather a bore.

As he swung along the empty front, the sunshine and the clean air with that delicious tang of the sea in it that one gets at high tide in Brighton, conspired to make him feel something of the gay dog his mother would have liked him to be.

Hang it all! he wanted a rest, a change, something different from the life he had been leading lately. A life with too many parties in it; too much running after Julia to this place and that; too little time to concentrate upon his book. A morning on the downs right away from people would do him all the good in the world; and if it happened that the society of Julia's pleasant Cousin Susan was thrown in, why should he cavil?

Why refuse to accept what the kind gods gave?

Alfrey's conscience was no dormouse. On the contrary, it was a vigilant, wakeful, loud-voiced animal that seldom left him in peace for long. This morning, however, he flung over it a thick blanket of oblivion, so that if, as usual, it started croaking when he wanted to enjoy himself, its disagreeable voice should be well muffled.

"I really think, Susan," Aunt Myrtle said, "that it's tiresome of Julia to expect us to amuse her young man. Why doesn't she come down and exercise him herself?"

"Julia's not fond of exercise at any time, and I suppose she thought that, as I would be taking out Bingo anyway, I might as well take him as well."

II

"You don't have to go off by train with Bingo. Why can't you walk quietly along the front towards Shoreham? The air is just as good by the sea as on the downs."

"But he wants to see the downs, Aunt Myrtle, and it's so quick by train—and such a dreary walk before one gets to them by road."

"Well, mind, you *must* be home for luncheon at half-past one, and I suppose he'd better come too; but I think it's an odd arrangement, and I'm not at all sure that your father would

approve . . . your going on those lonely downs.”

“They won’t be lonely on such a fine morning, Aunt Myrtle. Lots of people will be playing golf.”

“I wish you’d been playing golf. There’s some reason in that . . . but this walking—just walking. I *can’t* approve of it. However—— There’s the bell—don’t keep him waiting. I don’t want him brought in here. Since you are going, you may as well catch your train.”

As the front door was opened Susan and a joyful Bingo appeared in the passage. A business-like Susan in tweeds that suggested heather with the gleam of golden bracken. Her skirt was very short and she wore wonderful thick stockings to match it in complicated squares, thick brown brogue shoes with rubber on the soles and a hat to match the bracken, and when the sun caught her hair it was like the flash of a squirrel in a tree.

They sat opposite each other in the little motor-train, and Bingo, fussily trying to lick each of them in turn, was squeezed between their knees with a paw on each.

In spite of the fine morning, there were but few golfers in the train, and when they had climbed the short path leading to the Devil’s Dyke, when they had passed the dreadful shanties where in summer people sell tea and tell fortunes, and the

equally dreadful hotel that looks so sinister and wicked, the whole of Sussex seemed spread before them like a map, and not a soul was in sight except some rooks that Bingo chased in a vain and fruitless ecstasy.

Round and round in circles Bingo ran, and something of the pure joy in nature that possessed him passed into the other two, who had started to walk quite soberly in the direction of Poynings, so that their steps grew faster and lighter, and they jumped imaginary ditches and laughed at nothing for precisely the same reason that Bingo gave an occasional deep bark.

"Let's sit down a minute," Alfrey said presently. "It's quite dry here, and the sun's so hot. D'you know, I believe if I'd ever had anyone to encourage me when I was young, I might have played games—moderately—like other people."

"Why don't you start golf and tennis even now? It's not too late."

He shook his head. "I fear it is; and Julia doesn't care about either golf or tennis. You see, when I was a boy my mother was far too busy earning the money to keep us to think about games. Besides, in her youth women of her class never played games; and at school, the grammar-school, there were far more boys keen to play than they could arrange for, so naturally no one pressed a duffer to take any part."

"What about dancing? Julia's keen on that."

"Ah! there she has been an angel of patience. She has taught me to dance a bit, and I love it."

"She's a beautiful dancer herself, one of the very best in London."

"Everything she does, she does beautifully," Alfrey said, with sincere conviction, "and sometimes I feel a hopeless clodhopper beside her."

"I'm sure you needn't. Julia doesn't care a bit, really, about that sort of thing. Her whole heart is wrapped up in your work."

"Does that strike you as very odd?"

Susan turned an astonished face towards him.

"Odd!" she repeated. "Certainly not; it seems perfectly natural. One would always be keen on a man's job if one was going to marry him."

"Now you—suppose instead of marrying the splendid polo-playing, hunting, golfing Admirable Crichton of a fellow you will marry—suppose you fell in love with someone whose work happened to be something in which neither you nor your set had ever taken the slightest interest—could you suddenly cultivate that interest?"

"I think it would be difficult," Susan said, a thought huffily, "to find any subject in which some member of my 'set,' as you call it—I suppose

you mean my family?—had not taken an interest at some time or other, and if you are hinting that, except for Julia, we've none of us ever been literary in our tastes, you are wrong. My grandfather wrote and he'd read—well, possibly quite as much or even more than any of the most literary people that you know. Don't get into the habit of lumping people into 'sets.' ”

Delicious voice! even when, as now, it was admonitory. If she would only go on talking. . . .

“Please continue,” he said humbly. “Go on to tell me that my work is one-sided with so narrow a purview that I miss things that are under my nose. *Please* go on; it's so good for me.”

“I don't think your books are narrow—what I've read—but I think it's a great mistake to imagine that, in a large family, people are necessarily of one type.”

“Yet you are curiously alike physically, aren't you?”

“No, not even that. You couldn't find two people more unlike in every respect than Robert and Hugh.”

“Hugh is very like you.”

“Perhaps in appearance—not in character.”

“I don't know about character, but in manner he is. If I may say so, you both have the same sort of easy charm.”

Susan blushed and dimpled, and this time he noticed the dimples. He noticed everything about her—the soft oval of jaw and firm white chin, the red lips, the blue shadow under her eyes, the freshness and fragrance of her—and he was for a moment filled with a vast content. He wanted nothing but to sit there in the sun and watch her. To sit there in the sun and listen to her. To sit there in the sun . . .

Susan looked at the watch on her wrist and jumped up. "If we're to catch that train," she said, "we must run for it."

And they ran.

The sun went in behind a heavy bank of cloud. They caught their train with just half a minute to spare, and Alfrey's conscience threw off the muffling blanket and shouted at him so that he firmly refused Susan's invitation to lunch and dutifully went back to his people at the "Salisbury."

The conscience, however, didn't get it all its own way, for he expressed his intention of calling to pay his respects to Aunt Myrtle after tea.

III

"I really thought that young man would never go, Susan," Aunt Myrtle said, as the front door of the house in Norton Road was resonantly shut

behind Alfrey. "It's a quarter to seven, and he came at half-past five. What on earth did he come for again?"

"To see you, of course—he didn't see you this morning—and you're not a bit grateful."

"I suppose it was polite of him," Aunt Myrtle allowed grudgingly, "but I could have excused the attention. We have so little in common. Don't you find him very difficult to talk to?"

"Not in the least. But perhaps that's because he's always more anxious to listen than to talk himself, and I love talking."

"All you young people do—and it's generally vapid nonsense."

"Do you think he talks vapid nonsense?"

"Oh, I never said that. He's not conceited—at least outwardly—but he's uncomfortable. I can't exactly express what I mean, but I feel it very strongly, and I never cease to wonder at Julia. What *can* she see in him?"

When Susan went up to bed, Aunt Myrtle's maid always came in to brush her hair. For ten minutes every night Dawson brushed and brushed till Susan's long abundant hair shone like the coat of a well-groomed bay horse. Generally she chattered to Dawson, but this evening she sat silent and supine, lulled into lethargy, while the rhythmic sweep of the hard brush made her scalp tingle agreeably.

"Your hair's improved a lot since you came, Miss," Dawson said presently. "You'd neglected it dreadfully, and it looked quite faded. Miss Collett would never have had the fine head of hair she has now if she'd let it go when she was your age. I hope when you leave here you'll keep on with the brushing. There's nothing like it. It's worth all the hair-restorers in all the shops. You're stopping on a good bit yet, aren't you, Miss? I hope to do a lot more to it."

The question made Susan think long after Dawson had left her.

She had not intended to "stop on" at Hove very much longer. Julia wanted her at Woodlands; and Woodlands, with Julia and Uncle Godfrey and loads of pleasant people coming and going, was an infinitely more amusing place than Norton Road and Aunt Myrtle, even with the beloved Bingo thrown in.

Besides, they'd let her take Bingo with her to Woodlands. He'd get plenty of exercise there, even in the grounds.

Julia and Uncle Godfrey expected her, wanted her.

Aunt Myrtle only tolerated her, though she was kind enough.

Woodlands was more of a home to her than any place she had known since her father gave up the Manor. Aunt Em was always kind, always

glad to have her, but Aunt Em's life was one breathless whirl of boards and committees and sales and exhibitions in aid of Causes, and somehow lately the Causes had lost their savour for Susan.

Why, then, did she feel this curious unwillingness to fix an early date and go to Woodlands?

She was a bad hand at explaining, so she said, but some inward monitor sternly demanded an answer to that question.

Dawson had been gone quite ten minutes, and she still sat where she was in front of the glass, with her hair meekly parted in the middle and plaited in two long tails tied with tape. Dawson always parted it in the middle at night, because she declared that it gave the hair a "change," as in the day Susan wore it parted at the side. Dawson was ever on the look-out for "bare patches" or "thin weak spots."

It is possible that the tingling of Susan's scalp stimulated her brain to activity, for suddenly the answer to the question her mind had asked was clear and definite, though paradoxical.

She didn't want to go to Woodlands just now, for the simple reason that she wanted to go there too much.

She was afraid of the strength of her desire to go to Woodlands, and the most serious part of

it was that she wanted to go to Woodlands so ardently because at Woodlands she would stand a fair chance of meeting Alfrey Stowe every day.

And Alfrey Stowe was engaged to Julia and was going to be married to Julia at the end of April, and here they were in the middle of March.

Susan leant forward, put her elbows on the dressing-table, and cupped her chin in her hands, staring at her own image in the glass.

With her hair done like that she strongly resembled a Susan Collett who, painted by Sir Joshua Reynolds, hung in the picture-gallery at Aylberne. The Collett children were well instructed in the history of all the portraits, and this particular Susan—David had called her “sad-faced Susan”—had, after six months of marriage with the reigning Collett, tried to run away with a less masterful man. But before she could achieve her purpose the masterful man went after her and fetched her back, and she was so disheartened that she settled down, bore him six sons, and died quite old and “universally regretted.” Like many another old family, the Colletts were rather proud of their scandals if they were sufficiently ancient, and no attempt had ever been made to whitewash any of the pictured ancestors.

The present Susan—in spite of her likeness to

that ineffectual ancestress—knew very well that “sad-faced” did not describe her. “But,” with a little spasm of fear she asked herself, “shall I grow sad-faced because I can’t have what I want?”

Alone with the reflected Susan, the Susan of the meekly plaited hair, the bright eyes, the sunburnt cheeks, she became unblushingly frank.

“I don’t know why it is, but he does give me feelings. I love to be with him. I love him to look at me. And all the time I know perfectly well he belongs to Julia. Yet . . .”

There was a discreet rap at the door and Dawson put in her head to say: “Please, Miss Susan, Miss Collett would like to know if you are feeling unwell, as you haven’t put out your light.”

By the time the light was extinguished and Susan safely in bed, she had made up her mind to run no more risks. She would stay at Hove till she went to the Mabbits for the Point-to-Point, and only go to Woodlands from there. Then their wedding would be so near that Alfrey and Julia would have neither time nor eyes for anybody else; and she, Susan, would have got over what she stigmatized as “her silliness.”

After all, it was only a fortnight till she was due at Aylberne, and the races were sure to be fun, with Hugh and Lord William riding, and the

day before the races she'd try and run in to see Mrs. Stowe. It would please the old lady . . . and perhaps Alfrey, too, would be pleased when he heard she'd been.

BOOK III

THE REAL THING

1

"'Twas a very small garden;
The paths were of stone
Scattered with leaves,
With moss overgrown,
And a little old Cupid
Stood under a tree,
With a small broken bow
He stood aiming at me."

CHAPTER XVI

I

SUNDAY afternoon shortly after luncheon at Aylberne Manor. Mr. and Mrs. Mabbit and their house-party were supposed to be writing letters in their rooms.

Susan stole out of hers to go round the gardens by herself. She wore no hat and no gloves. It was one of the trials of Hove that, except in the little green patch at the back of the house in Norton Road, she always had to be what Aunt Myrtle called "properly dressed."

March was going out like the proverbial lamb and the sun shone warm on grey stone walls and dark yew hedges. Great clumps of early daffodils flashed golden among the grass and in the borders wine-brown wallflowers swung in a light breeze like censers filled with incense.

She strolled slowly about the ordered formal gardens, noting the dear familiar features—and the changes.

Presently she came to the Nuns' Walk and went through it to the little old garden at the edge of

the copse. The little old garden so distant and so derelict that even the tidy Mabbits had not troubled to improve it, while the Mabbit children had too many amusements arranged for them in the holidays to trouble about gardens.

As Susan stood there in the warm Sunday silence, even Aunt Myrtle could hardly have accused her of lack of sentiment.

It was so full of memories, that little garden, and of gracious thronging ghosts. Hesper with her eager face and slender limping figure. Grandfather, courteous and withdrawn and beautiful. Yet so patient always with the stupid people who wished to interest him in their turbulent affairs. So aloof and yet so kind. Amazing product of an age that had leisure and used it.

David, bright-haired and brilliant, dear dispenser of joy, who "was liked in any company because he liked it."

Was David, too, a late flowering of that comfortable, spacious age so soon to be mowed down by the scythe of time?

Dogs, too, innumerable dogs seemed to cluster round her in that little old garden; for wherever the children were, there also went the dogs. Fat foxhound puppies, so tubby and slobbering and "mishtiful." Keen little Hamish—ah, Hamish was buried in the corner over there. Sheila, Aunt Myrtle's sable collie, with her long pointed

nose and exquisite tawny coat. Wise-faced ponies with long tails, white rabbits, black kittens—a long procession of the animals they had loved seemed to move past Susan, kind ghosts all.

She went and stood under the pink almond—just one branch was in bloom—beside the little stone Cupid: and, as she laid loving, ungloved hands upon his shoulders, faintly warmed by the afternoon sun, there sang in her mind some verses by a poet that Alfrey and Julia had been raving about the last time she had seen them together.

They had fascinated her because they recalled to her mind so vividly the little old garden at Aylberne, so she learned them by heart. Half unconsciously now she recited them aloud:

“ ’Twas a very small garden;
The paths were of stone
Scattered with leaves,
With moss overgrown,
And a little old Cupid
Stood under a tree,
With a small broken bow
He stood aiming at me.”

She paused, pleased by the aptness of the quotation, soothed by the Sunday stillness, when a voice broke the silence and somebody said:

“Oh, please go on. I’m sure you know it all.”

And there, head and shoulders appearing above the box hedge, stood Alfrey Stowe.

She snatched her hands from the fat stone shoulders and stood staring at Alfrey, as though he were yet another ghost.

"I thought you were in London," she said. "What on earth are you doing here?"

"I came down last night to see my mother, and this afternoon I've come to call upon you."

"People who come to call," she said primly, "come up the avenue. You must have come through the copse, and it is trespassing. There's a notice there."

"I squared the keeper years ago. He is scornfully aware that I couldn't poach so much as a field-mouse, even if I wanted to. When I was a boy he used to let me wander in your woods——"

"And did you ever see any of us?"

"Quite often. I used to watch you and your brothers in this very garden, but you were always too busy disputing among yourselves to take any notice of me. May I come in and pay my call?"

"You can't climb the hedge, it's too wide. You'd better come round.

He came round, and they sat down side by side on the stone seat facing the Cupid.

Alfrey looked at Susan and saw that she was fair.

How bright her hair was, ruffled by the breeze. How pleasant it was to see her again: just to sit

on the same bench with her in that good sunshine.

A straggly sweetbrier bush was bursting into leaf. Susan picked a bit and rubbed it between her fingers and said, "Well?" inquiringly.

"I really came," he said, "to thank you for going to see my mother again. She was awfully pleased."

"I'm glad. I loved seeing her. But where is Julia?"

"Julia couldn't come with me. There's the usual big Sunday party at Woodlands. - Cousin Susan, are you going to finish that poem for me?"

"Certainly not. That poem was for the Cupid. I never dreamt of another listener."

"You felt that he was listening?"

"I'm not sure. He was always a detached little person, and he probably dislikes me, for I broke his bow, ages ago."

"All the same, he seems to be aiming at us both. It's a curiously clever effect—unless you stand right behind him he seems to be aiming at you, wherever you are."

"How is Julia?" Susan asked primly.

"She seemed extremely well when I parted from her on Friday evening. I was dining there. She expects you back next week."

"She and Uncle Godfrey are the most hospitable people in the world. They're always ready to give me a bed, and it's only when you have no

settled home of your own that you really appreciate such liberality."

"But surely, in your case, such a condition is only temporary. You are all coming back here some day?"

She shook her head. "I doubt it. It's really better for the place, and the farmers and the folk in the cottages, to have rich people here, who can afford to spend and expect no return for their money. There are no broken fences now—no leaky roofs. All the repairs that we ought to have done, and couldn't, are being done. They really haven't altered things much, and they've left this—just as it was, and for that I bless them."

Alfrey made no reply. As always when he met Susan, he surrendered to the charm of her voice. It was for him a sort of elixir that soothed and rehabilitated, that flooded his being with a vast content.

As he remained silent she turned to look at him. He was not looking at her, and she noticed that he was wretchedly thin, and there were lines about his mouth and round his eyes that were certainly not inscribed by happiness.

"Cousin Alfrey——"

He started and, turning towards her, met her kind brown eyes. "Is anything the matter? You look rather worried."

"I expect I've been burning the candle at both

ends. Trying to work, and playing a good deal too—out at Woodlands. Tell me, you, who know Julia so well, do you think she'll be bored with me if I have to live quietly for quite long periods? No one can do any sort of work decently unless he seeks sanctuary. Will she mind?"

"I don't think Julia will mind anything that helps your work. She's so proud of it."

"Proud of *it*, perhaps—but sometimes I wonder if I can ever make her proud of me."

"That's nonsense," Susan said briskly. "You and your work are one."

"That's just what we are not. To parody Byron, 'Man's work is of his life a thing apart.' It's certainly quite separate from me . . . and there is a me, you know. There really is."

He was pathetic, she felt, like a child who wanted to be understood, comforted, reassured.

"Don't you think," she said briskly, "that people like you, who dwell so much in realms of the imagination, rather lose touch with realities and are apt to fancy things? . . . and find mountainous mole-hills at every step?"

"Suffer from vapours, in fact. Perhaps you're right. I will gas no more."

"Will you come up to the house and have tea and be introduced to the Mabbits?" She rose as she spoke. "They would be thrilled to meet you."

"I think not," he said; "you've given me a lot to ponder over. I'll walk back the way I came, and ruminate."

"It's three miles—long miles . . . you'd better come and have tea first."

"No. Tea would spoil it. Good-bye, Cousin Susan. . . . I wish you would have spoken the rest of the Cupid poem for me."

Susan shook her head and rose.

For an instant he sat where he was looking up at her, and his lined face was very sad. Then he too rose, and side by side they stood in the vibrant silence that says so much more than any speech.

"Good-bye," he said, and held out his hand and as she placed hers within it, almost against her will, she quoted softly, as in a dream:

"With a small broken bow
He stood aiming at me."

He lifted her hand to his lips and kissed it, and the dream smelled of sweetbrier.

"Things are in a bit of a muddle, aren't they?" Susan murmured, still in her dream.

He dropped her hand muttering, "God help me!" left her, and the broken lichened gate swung behind him with a clang.

For full three minutes Susan stood there perfectly still. Her pulses were throbbing. There

was a singing in her ears and the sun had gone behind a cloud.

Then she ran for all she was worth back to the house.

What had she said to Alfrey?

What had she admitted?

What did it all mean?

One thing was certain. It wasn't healthy in that enchanted garden. She would go there no more.

II

Scratch—scratch—dash—stop went Alfrey's pen. No other sound in the warm little room save the occasional crackle of a newspaper softly turned by Mrs. Stowe, who was sitting by the fire reading *The British Weekly*.

Half-past eleven. She stifled a yawn. She wanted to go to bed, but her rising would disturb Alfrey, and that must not be. It was her pride and glory that he didn't mind her in the room with him while he was working.

She might feast her eyes upon him; knit, sew, or read the paper. So long as she didn't talk to him, she might be there. It used to be so when he was a boy working for a scholarship. It was so still now that he was a man, and the names of the books he had written were advertised in the tube trains. Extraordinary celebrity this.

Mrs. Stowe had read *The British Weekly* from cover to cover.

The clock on the mantelpiece struck twelve. It had a loud, aggressive strike. Alfrey looked up.

"Mother, you must go to bed."

"All right, dear, and what about you? Aren't you coming?—with that early train to catch an' all. And aren't you going to read me what you've wrote?"

"Not now, Mother. I'll send it to you when it's typed—as I always do. I've had a good evening, though I fear it's been rather dull for you."

She pulled herself up out of her chair, and with a little pang he suddenly realized that she was growing old. Not often demonstrative, he went to her and took her in his arms, kissing her warmly.

"Dear lad," Mrs. Stowe whispered huskily. "I'll never push myself. You beg of her to try and like me a little."

"I'm sure she'll like you more than a little when she knows you, Mother. And you must make allowances for Julia—the war—no mother—a different environment—different standards from ours. Mother dear, I do so want the two women I love most in the world to be friends."

When his mother had gone to bed, Alfrey sat in her chair by the dying fire to think. He had lied to her. There *were* two women he loved best in the world, but Julia was not one of them.

There was "one woman and only she," and that woman was not Julia.

It was unfair to Julia to marry her, feeling as he did.

It was unjust to Julia to let her marry him, knowing, as he felt she knew, nothing whatever of his real character, his temperament, his deeply hidden loves and beliefs and desires.

His whole being cried out for Susan. The girl with the kind eyes and sweet, companionable voice who understood him. Him, Alfrey Stowe, the shy, sensitive, inarticulate *real* Alfrey Stowe.

The long walk in the afternoon had tired him, and, in spite of his miseries and perplexities, he fell asleep in his mother's chair before the fire.

When, stiff and chilly, he awoke, the noisy clock was striking three.

III

Susan didn't want to go back to Wimbledon. She didn't want to see Alfrey again—not for a long time—not till he was married to Julia. But just then she felt rather like a parcel. She had to go where she was sent. A girl trained to no trade or profession and with no home of her own has just to fit in with other people's plans. Ever since she finished being a V. A. D. she had possessed

no abiding place, and she was getting very tired of it. At the moment her father and mother were at Cannes and staying at a most expensive hotel where they certainly wouldn't want to pay for a perfectly healthy daughter, and it was understood that while they were there Susan was to "pay visits." She always had plenty of invitations, and, till lately, had thoroughly enjoyed the luxurious, cheerful life after all the dreary war years. But she was beginning to be tired of it. She missed some regular occupation, some definite aim. Yet she knew that any suggestion on her part of training for paid work would be received with outcries of dismay from the authorities. She felt rather guilty, too, in that she had, during and since the war, refused four perfectly good offers of marriage—sterling, eligible men of her own class, who would, any one of them, have made her an admirable husband—and she had refused them all for no other reason than that she wasn't in the least in love, though she cordially liked them all four.

She had every chance. She had a good time and met plenty of men, but hitherto she seemed incapable of falling in love. She was chummy but never interested. Lately she had been first of all interested and then . . . She refused to consider that "then."

Lately, too, she had been sorry both for Alfrey

and Julia, but mostly for Alfrey. She thought they were making a mistake. That Julia cared more for what Alfrey could do than for what Alfrey was. That Alfrey would expect things from Julia that she could never give him.

Julia, the cherished only daughter of a rich, brilliant, and exceedingly busy man, had never had either to give in or give up. There had been a lot of both in Susan's life; and Susan, who was shrewd and observant, had decided long ago that there would still be a lot of both in any marriage, however much in love the marriers might be.

Julia had always been taken care of. Susan liked taking care of people. Julia had had many serious and passionate flirtations. Susan had had perhaps even more flirtations, considering her youth, but they had been neither serious nor passionate.

She was afraid of passion. When it came she knew she would go under. She was afraid of her own strong feeling when Alfrey had taken her hand in that little derelict garden. Afraid of the turmoil of her thoughts when he exclaimed, "God help me!"

To take away another woman's man had always seemed to her a despicable act.

If she thought Alfrey was wavering in his allegiance to Julia, she ought to put whole continents between them.

Yet if she refused to go to Wimbledon, what a tornado of questions would break over her devoted head . . . and Susan could never explain . . .

Better to go back and keep out of his way.

IV

"So you saw Alfrey's mother again," Julia said, as she followed Susan into her room on arrival. "What did you think of her this time?"

"I liked her. I've always liked her. She's kind and jolly and definite—not just like every other old lady."

"I should think she *is* definite."

"Well, I'd rather have that than being nothingly. You, who are always talking about 'types,' ought to appreciate it."

"I dare say I should appreciate it if she was going to be *your* mother-in-law, but as she happens to be mine, dismay takes the place of appreciation. You *do* see, Susan, don't you, how impossible she is as a guest?"

"But if you love Alfrey, Julia?"

"Loving Alfrey has nothing to do with it. One makes up one's mind in-laws will be a nuisance but not an incubus."

"I don't think," Susan said slowly, "that she'd ever be an incubus. She struck me as rather a proud old lady."

Julia fiddled with a tassel on her gown. "You might explain to father," she said.

"Explain what?"

"The sort of person she is—it would come better from you. In some ways he's old-fashioned and he seems to think we ought to ask her here—even before the wedding. Do tell him you don't think she'd be happy here——"

"I'm certain she wouldn't be happy here if you feel like that," said Susan, and shut a drawer with unnecessary force. "It would be the greatest mistake to ask her."

"I'd like to ask her if I was perfectly sure she wouldn't come. That would please Daddy, *and* Alfrey. D'you think she'd come?"

"I doubt it, but you couldn't be sure whether she wouldn't make a great effort to please Alfrey and you."

"That's what I'm afraid of. I suppose that terrible aunt wasn't there?"

"No one was there but Mrs. Stowe."

"Alfrey went down for Sunday. She can't say I keep him away from her, anyhow."

"Julia, listen. I don't believe it matters a bit about asking her if you only *feel* right."

"How can I 'feel right,' as you call it? I can't pretend to myself that I like her, whatever I may do for Alfrey."

"But you might try to feel kind—then perhaps

you'd begin to like her. People always know perfectly well whether one likes them or not."

"Do you think she likes me?"

"I think she's terrified of you. She knows, you see, that you can take Alfrey away from her if you like. A wife always can more or less."

"I shouldn't dream of trying to take Alfrey away from her, but they must, both of them, be reasonable, and face things as they are."

"It seems to me it's you who do not face things as they are."

"How do you mean?"

"That you're annoyed with Mrs. Stowe for being . . . well, Mrs. Stowe . . . and that's surely quite unreasonable."

"Oh, dear!" Julia exclaimed, "I *do* wish Alfrey had been an orphan!"

CHAPTER XVII

I

WHEN Alfrey met Julia on his return from Frampton Massey, she had been so unfeignedly glad to see him, had thrown herself upon his breast with such demonstrative affection, that he felt he had been unjust to her. She *did* love him, and, being very responsive to affection, he decided, there and then, that however much he might have been mistaken as to his own feelings—she must not suffer. She must never know.

She was full of enthusiasm, too, about a flat she had seen in Cork Street. A service flat, at present occupied by friends, who would be willing to sublet it to them for six months directly after Easter.

It was arranged that they should go together to see it on a Saturday, two days after Susan got back to Woodlands. To her relief, she had not met Alfrey since her return, and, poignantly conscious of secret disloyalty to Julia, she had tried hard to be even more sympathetic than usual; had devoted herself to helping Julia with her

trousseau, and to listening patiently to the pros and cons regarding "service" versus unfurnished flats or houses.

Julia was looking particularly distinguished that Saturday. She wore her blue fox furs, magnificent stole and muff, with an admirably cut and heavily braided grey coat and skirt, and an Egyptian toque with curious silver ornaments hanging down over her ears.

Alfrey, who, as they went into the "Berkeley" for lunch, caught sight of his own reflection in a mirror, was painfully conscious that he didn't match his lady. Spectacled face; insignificant, stooping figure—who was he to be following this resplendent vision? With all his heart he longed to be lunching inconspicuously at Simpson's.

Julia seemed to know so many people, and he was convinced that they all stared at him, wondering how on earth she came to be lunching in such company.

They were both hungry, and the food was good. The wine was good, even the coffee was passable, and Alfrey was a connoisseur in coffee—his mother made it so well.

But a demon of taciturnity possessed him, and even the patient Julia began to feel irritated by his unresponsiveness.

The flat was small, conventionally furnished and extremely expensive. Alfrey took an instant dis-

like to the young woman who let them in, and decided that such surroundings would undoubtedly be the death of any creative faculty he might possess.

He was, however, polite if non-committal to Julia's friends, said he must think it over, and bowed himself and Julia out, hailed a taxi and gave the driver his address in the Temple. Julia was coming to his chambers for tea.

"Well," she asked, "what do you think of it?"

"I think it's perfectly damnable," he answered.

"Why?"

"For one thing, we couldn't even choose our own servant."

"It's not a case of choosing servants at present, it's a case of thankfully taking what you can get."

"But the rooms, Julia. You, who live in such a beautiful house, how could you ever bear that furniture?"

"I shouldn't be there much. Remember, we'd only be living there from Monday to Friday, and it would only be for a little while. You must confess it's awfully central."

"Far too central. We don't want to spend our time in Piccadilly."

She made no reply. Alfrey wrinkled his forehead, wracking his brains for something conciliatory to say, and failed to think of anything. Her shoulder was touching his as they sat silent, side

by side, but there was no joy in the contact. For one guilty moment he imagined what it would be like to sit there with Susan, to be taking Susan to talk in his sitting-room. To listen to Susan talking. . . .

The taxi turned under the archway leading to the Temple.

II

Alfrey's chambers were in Hare Court, sublet to him by a delicate barrister who had gone to Australia for his health.

It was not the first time by a long way that Julia had been there; but to-day they both had felt there was something special in her visit, for they were to decide upon their first home together. They were to talk things over and settle much that was still vague and nebulous in their plans.

Julia had been so pleased about the flat in Cork Street. It would solve so many problems, and now—Alfrey turned it down.

But she was accustomed to getting her own way, and returned to the attack.

"Kiss me, dearest," she said sweetly. "I'll sit in this nice comfy chair and you can sit on the floor and lean against my knees—and I can stroke your dear hair."

Alfrey hated having his hair stroked, so he poked

the fire and stood leaning his back against the mantelpiece.

"Dearest, tell me exactly why you don't like that little flat. It seems to me so entirely what we want—merely as a temporary *asile*, of course—while we are looking for our real home . . . what's the matter with it?"

"It's ugly for one thing—surely you must see that."

"Is this so very beautiful?" Julia asked, turning her long neck in a survey of the little room, "or large?"

"It's neither the one nor the other, but it's sensible. It's quiet, and I can work here."

"Cork Street is considered fairly quiet for London, and there's a room you could work in there. Or, if you must have a separate place to work, why not keep this on too for the time being?"

"I couldn't afford that, my dear; besides, you wouldn't like it if I came here to work in the evening, and I often do work in the evening."

"Daddy never works in the evening," Julia said reproachfully. "He doesn't think it healthy."

"I bet your father worked in the evening when he was my age—and, in any case, his work's quite different from mine. I *couldn't* work in any single one of those rooms."

"I'm a little amused," Julia said, still quite sweetly, "that you make such a strong point of

environment. You seem to forget that I've seen your mother's house—and yet you told me you'd done quite a lot of work down there."

Alfrey flushed. "That's my home," he said shortly. "It's familiar—and dear."

"And, you must confess, most uncommonly ugly," Julia added.

"I dare say it is, but it is full of associations. Can't you understand that atmosphere can cover a multitude of mahogany sins?"

"*I could make that flat so pretty,*" Julia sighed.

"Another thing I don't like about it," Alfrey continued, as though he hadn't heard, "is that there's no bedroom where we could put up a friend. When we have a house of our own, I'd like to be able to have a friend occasionally."

"People don't 'put up' people much in London," Julia said sharply. "One has far too many engagements. That sort of visiting has quite died out—it's old-fashioned and rather impossible."

"It's going to be possible for us," he said quietly.

"I'm sure Daddy would always let us take anyone we like to Woodlands for week-ends."

"My dear child, I couldn't constantly trade upon your father's good nature like that. Besides, week-ends don't suit everybody. People from the country, for instance, like week-middles. Suppose my mother wanted to come up—she rarely leaves

home, but she might want to see a play or two—she enjoys an occasional play.”

Julia longed to reply, “That’s what hotels are for,” but she restrained the impulse and said nothing at all.

Alfrey waited for the gracious, understanding words that might do so much to bring about a real sympathy between them; waited with almost breathless anxiety.

Surely she must see . . .

“I’d like a cigarette, Alfrey dear,” Julia said, with a yawn. “These discussions are so fatiguing.”

He lit her cigarette for her with hands that were not very steady. Again he leant against the mantelpiece and looked down at her, wondering. Was she deliberately cruel to him, or only stupid?

Then he grew angry and lost his head.

“Look here, Julia,” he said brusquely, “we’ve got to understand one another about this. If there’s no welcome for my mother in your house, it can’t be my house too, so that’s that.”

Julia looked at him between half-closed lids. He had never spoken rudely to her before. She was tired and cross—and disappointed. She would bring him to heel before she’d done with him.

“I don’t understand what you mean,” she said. “I’ve tried all I know to spare you about your mother, and it’s just because I want to save

you and her pain and embarrassment that I've attempted, without putting it into words, to show you how impossible it would be to have her amongst my friends . . . and surely you can't expect me to drop all my friends because your mother would be uncomfortable with them. I'm prepared to give up a good deal for you, Alfrey dear, but I'm afraid I couldn't quite give up all that."

Alfrey stiffened. He was obstinate as well as Julia, and even an implied slight to his mother filled him with resentment.

"No one asks you to 'give up' anything that I can see. It appears that it is you who ask me to give up the possibility of asking my mother to our house because you don't consider her good enough for your friends."

"Our friends, Alfrey, and 'good enough' is not the phrase—incompatible is nearer."

"Incompatible be hanged! If she's incompatible with your crowd—my friends, any that have seen her, delight in her—I'm incompatible too."

"You are most unreasonable, Alfrey. Are you *trying* to pick a quarrel with me?"

Julia was angry now. She sat forward in her chair, and her voice was strident.

He regarded her gloomily.

"I feel," he said, "that we've come to a parting of the ways. Either you consent to come with me on mine or I'll have to travel upon it alone."

"You mean that you wish to break our engagement?" Julia asked breathlessly.

"I could not make you happy," he said. "I've felt that more and more lately. It's better to part now, surely, than later, when it would be so much more painful both for us and for others."

"Then," she said, rising, "since you no longer care for me—I'd better give you back your ring," and with a magnificent gesture she drew it off and held it out to him on the palm of her long white hand.

"You know it isn't that, Julia," he said, rather feebly, "but I'm certain I should disappoint you."

"You've done that already," she said. "You may be a genius, Alfrey, but you are assuredly no gentleman."

"You are possibly quite right about me," he said meekly, "but I think you are hard on my mother. Your own cousin got on with her perfectly, and, I could see, liked her."

"How do you know Susan liked her?"

"Well, she spoke as if she did."

"You saw her when you were down at Frampton Massey? Where?"

"I called to thank her for going to see my mother."

"You called upon Susan, at Aylberne, and neither of you told me anything about it!"

"It was quite unimportant. I was only there a few minutes."

"It was dishonourable of Susan to conceal it; but she is dishonourable."

"I'm certain she's not."

"Listen, Alfrey. I wouldn't have told you but for this. You remember that book you gave me——?"

"There were several books. Please don't send *them* back."

"I mean *A Divided Interest*. For fun I wrote some verses in it—pretending they were from you——"

"I know," Alfrey said. "It touched me very much."

"*You know?*" Julia exclaimed. "How do you know?"

"What were you going to tell me? Please go on."

"I lent that book to Susan and she lost it."

"I know," Alfrey said again.

"How do you know?" Julia demanded furiously. "Did she tell you?"

"Go on with your story, Julia."

"Well, instead of owning up like an honest girl, she bought another copy and tried to imitate your handwriting——"

"But it was my handwriting," Alfrey interrupted.

"One of us is mad," Julia said wearily. "How could it be your handwriting?"

"For the simple reason that she was frightfully distressed at having lost your book *because* of the verses and came to me to write them again . . ."

"And you both conspired together to make a fool of me! I was right when I said you were no gentleman."

"Susan has no idea to this day that you wrote the first set of verses yourself."

"I suppose she took you to see those Brownies that you wrote about. Did she?"

"No. She had no idea I was there—till afterwards. I saw her go in and followed her."

"You followed her—even then. I suppose you waited for her and spoke to her afterwards?"

"I did."

"And she asked you to write about them?"

"No. I offered."

"And you neither of you ever said one word about it to me! I've wondered always how you came to do it. But I've finished with Susan. I won't have her in the house any more. I believe she is at the bottom of all this trouble between us——"

"Julia, listen. She is utterly and absolutely innocent of anything of the sort."

"I don't believe you. Susan is a cold-blooded flirt, with neither sex nor temperament nor any-

thing but a wax-doll sort of good looks for her attraction. You and she are well matched, but I can tell you this—she's as proud and cold as the sphinx. She may amuse herself with you, but you won't get anything more from her."

Would her voice never cease?

For hours after she had gone it tortured his ears. It left its echo in the quiet Temple. The pigeons brought it on their beating wings. He flung the windows open and the distant rumble of the Strand seemed but a background for it.

And, worst of all, he felt that Julia had been treated abominably.

She was right. He was no gentleman; only a well-meaning, muddle-headed fool who mistook his physical sensations for love. Love that includes everything and can yet, seemingly, exclude so much when the careless and the hasty mistake its semblance for itself.

What could he expect from any woman but pity?

Yet Susan had given him more than pity that day in the little old garden at Aylberne. And Alfrey hadn't the slightest intention of immolating himself upon any altar constructed by Victorian ideals of honour and self-sacrifice.

If Susan loved him, and he believed she did, he would take her and hold her against all the world in the face of her family's opposition, were that

family twenty times as powerful and conventional as the Colletts; but he did want above all things to save Susan annoyance, and the difficulties that must ensue did Julia carry out her threat.

She couldn't have meant what she said about Susan.

She would be too proud.

She would never confess to jealousy of Susan.

God! What a scene!

And what a brute she had made him feel!

In common decency he couldn't make any attempt either to see or write to Susan just yet.

He must wait.

Perhaps he had better go away for a bit. No; that would look cowardly. He must face the music and see it out . . . and on whatever other grounds Julia chose to explain their broken engagement he would uphold her.

She would never, for her own sake, dare to implicate Susan.

CHAPTER XVIII

I

SIR GODFREY and Susan were having tea when Julia, tense and tight-lipped, swept into the room.

"Hullo, Julia, what have you done with Alfrey?" Sir Godfrey asked, as no one followed her. Then, as he caught sight of her face: "What's the matter?"

"There is this much the matter," she said bitterly. "My engagement is at an end, and unless Susan leaves the house at once, I must refuse to stay here."

Sir Godfrey laid his cup carefully on the brass tray and got up from his chair. He was very tired. He had been at two long and tiring consultations that afternoon.

He took his daughter's hands in his firm clasp and quietly pushed her down into his own chair.

"Gently, my child, gently. You and Alfrey have evidently quarrelled about something, but what has poor Susan to do with it?"

All the same, when he noticed Susan's scarlet,

distressed face, he realized with something of a shock that perhaps Julia was not talking quite so wildly as he thought.

“Poor Susan has this much to do with it, that she has flirted with Alfrey behind my back. She went to his rooms before we were engaged, and took him to see her Brownies, and has met him since at Aylberne, and neither of them ever even mentioned any of these meetings to me. Was that natural or straightforward or decent even? But I’m not going to indulge in recrimination. Alfrey is not what I thought him, and Susan has proved herself treacherous beyond belief. It is she who has broken my engagement and broken my heart—and I refuse to stay in the same house with her another day. If she can’t go—I must.”

Julia had risen as she spoke—tall and tragic and accusing.

Sir Godfrey looked from his pale daughter to his scarlet niece, who had also risen and was standing like a prisoner at the dock during Julia’s denunciation.

“Have you nothing to say, Susan?” he asked.

“Only this,” she answered breathlessly, “that I have never flirted with Alfrey, neither by word or deed or look. Never. I have never tried to make mischief between Alfrey and Julia, though mischief may have come from things I have done.”

"Can you truly say," Julia asked sternly, "that you know Alfrey cares nothing about you and that you care nothing for him? If you can say that, I will take back everything. On your honour—if you have any—can you say it?"

Susan didn't answer for a couple of seconds. "I have not the slightest reason . . . to believe . . . that Alfrey cares anything about me," she faltered.

"And you?"—Julia held up an accusing finger—"what about you?"

"I cannot see that my feelings are any business of yours, and I refuse to answer."

"There, Father!" Julia said bitterly, "surely that is enough."

And she swept out of the room.

"I had better go and pack," Susan said, in a small hushed voice. "I can go to Aunt Myrtle if I send her a wire. She's awfully decent the way she'll always have any of us. Perhaps when I'm away it will all blow over. . . . Uncle Godfrey . . . it hasn't been as despicable as it sounds. It truly hasn't. Somehow things got crooked from the very first—that was my fault—but truly, truly, it hasn't been quite as Julia said, though, of course, it seems so to her, and she has every right to be furious with me."

"Women," sighed Sir Godfrey, as he sank into

his chair again, "are most unaccountable. Above all in their loves. What either you or Julia can see in that plain-looking little man is incomprehensible to me . . . and yet it seems the fellow has been playing fast and loose with both of you. I confess, Susan, you are a surprise to me. . . . What in the world were you doing in that fellow's rooms? God knows you're all emancipated enough, but that really is a bit strong."

"I've never been in his rooms," Susan said wearily, "though I don't suppose there's much difference—I went to his office."

"But why?"

"Julia probably can tell you why if you ask her. Uncle Godfrey—I can't explain any more. The whole horrid thing has just happened—and I'm more sorry than I can say. May I telephone to the post office?"

"Susan, tell me, you don't really care for him—do you?"

"Uncle Godfrey, I don't know. I wouldn't tell anyone but you. . . . I never meant to, but from the first time . . . I ever saw him . . . I seemed to feel things—new things, new and frightening—that I'd never felt before. . . . I'm not like that. . . . Oh, Uncle Godfrey, I *am* so miserable, and I can swear to you that he has never said one word of love to me—not one word."

She flung herself down on her knees beside Sir

Godfrey's chair and burst into a passion of sobs, hiding her face against his shoulder.

"So," he said, "so—I'll go and telephone, my child. It would be best, perhaps, for you to leave as soon as possible—but first of all go and say good-bye to Julia. You must own it's hard on Julia. It may all straighten out, but I confess I'd like to deal faithfully with Mr. Alfrey Stowe."

"Uncle Godfrey, listen; he may have behaved badly to Julia. I fear, perhaps, he has. But he has never, never made love to me. Please, please remember that."

"There are more ways than one of making love," Sir Godfrey said grimly.

II

Slowly Susan mounted the stairs and tapped at Julia's door.

No answer. She turned the handle. The door was not locked, and she went in.

Still in her coat and furs, her hat cast upon the floor, Julia was lying face downwards on the bed.

Susan shut the door softly.

Julia lifted her head and looked up. "What do you want?" she asked. "Have you come to triumph over me in my misery?"

"I've come to say good-bye and to tell you

how awfully sorry I am. I'm very miserable too, Julia."

Julia looked curiously at Susan's tear-stained face. "I can't make you out, Susan. I thought you were fond of me."

"I *am* fond of you."

"Then why did you keep it all dark about having gone to Alfrey's office and taking him to see the Brownies? He and I weren't engaged then. I can't see any object in it."

"There wasn't any object in it except to save you annoyance. I thought if you knew that he had rewritten the verses you'd be vexed at not having recognized they *were* his."

"How could I dream you'd do such a thing as to go to him like that? What on earth made you do it? I'm sure it wasn't all to save me annoyance—that's nonsense. What was the real reason?"

"I think . . . it was partly because I wanted to see if he was really as stern and superior as you said he was . . . but I *was* awfully worried about having lost your book."

"Ah!" Julia raised herself on her elbow. "You confess you *did* want to see if you could attract him. At last I'm getting at the truth."

"No, that's not the truth, Julia. I only wanted to see if he'd dislike me as you seemed to think he would."

"Susan, tell me, since you seem to be in a truth-telling mood: did Alfrey ever say anything about those verses to you?"

"Say anything about those verses," Susan repeated, in a dull, puzzled voice. "Only that he feared he couldn't write them quite the same again. He couldn't remember. Neither could I."

Julia sank back on her pillows. "You might have left us in peace, I think," she said piteously. "I'd never done *you* any harm."

"I never *wanted* to do you any."

"Perhaps not, but you've done it thoroughly enough. I thought I was so safe with Alfrey. I thought he was good—in the old-fashioned way, like Father. That you could depend on him. That he would never go back on me or be unfaithful. And it turns out that he's just like everybody else . . . and I trusted him so."

What could Susan say?

Every word that the poor hoarse voice uttered stabbed her to the heart, and yet in that wounded heart she believed that Alfrey *was* "good in the old-fashioned way, like Father"; that he was loyal and faithful; that there could be no shadow of turning in him if he really loved.

All the time she was silently stroking Julia's feverish, twitching hand her heart protested that Alfrey had done right.

The hoarse voice ceased. Julia lay on her back

with closed eyes, looking queerly hunched up and uncomfortable in her heavy wraps.

"May I take off your shoes for you, Julia?—and wouldn't you be cooler if you took off your coat? It's very warm in here."

"Please go away, Susan," Julia said wearily. "If I want anybody I can ring."

"Good-bye, Julia."

"Oh, *please* go!"

Susan went. She spent the next hour packing feverishly in her own room. Sir Godfrey had got Aunt Myrtle on the telephone. He would send Susan in the motor to Victoria. She did not ask what he had said to her aunt.

She was very miserable during the drive to the station; very miserable indeed. It was truly dreadful to have been even the indirect cause of anybody's broken engagement. And yet at the back of all her misery—just as a kitten will go on playing his absurd games with a reel of cotton what time tragedy enwraps his household—so in the dark turmoil of Susan's mind a gay little agile thought whisked in and out among the gloom.

In vain she chased it to the darkest corner of her consciousness. Probably the whole fuss was all only a lovers' quarrel. It would all straighten out. Julia and Alfrey would be friends again, and more than friends, to-morrow, perhaps.

When out rushed that leaping, dancing, twirling thought.

At Victoria Susan shut that kitten of a thought firmly into a basket, that she might concentrate upon what it would be wisest to tell Aunt Myrtle.

CHAPTER XIX

I

A BAD time followed for Susan. Among the whole of her numerous relatives she was regarded by those nearest to her as, perhaps, an indirect cause; by those who knew least, as the immediate cause of Julia's broken engagement. And, to the Colletts, to be in any way concerned with the breaking of an engagement, that had been announced in the papers, was about as disgraceful as being implicated in a divorce.

The short paragraph appearing in the Court and Society column of the leading journals that "the marriage arranged, etc., would not take place," seemed to Susan always to be followed by lines in invisible ink to the effect that "poor Julia's" cousin, Susan Collett, was by her deceitful and treacherous conduct sole cause of such severance.

Susan blamed herself and suffered acute pangs of remorse in that, owing to her levity over the loss of Julia's book, she became entangled in the meshes of what was, in the first instance, a quite innocently

meant deception. She was willing to lie down and let people jump on her as hard as they liked about that. But where she rebounded and came up against her people, above all against Aunt Myrtle, was in her refusal to acknowledge any sorrow over the actual breaking off of the marriage between Alfrey and Julia. Instead of grieving over that, she stoutly maintained that they could never really have loved one another, or the most mischief-making cousin in England, which she certainly was not, couldn't have estranged them for long.

This effrontery on Susan's part was particularly shocking to Aunt Myrtle, who cross-questioned and baited her till she felt like a prisoner undergoing the third degree.

Her father wrote from Cannes, where he had been sent with Mrs. Collett by the combined generosity of Sir Godfrey and Aunt Em, what he called "a strong letter," absolutely forbidding her "either to see or hold any communication with that undesirable young man, Alfrey Stowe."

Her mother wrote plaintively about "the good offers she had refused in the past only to be dazzled by that little will-o'-the-wisp of a man who was so impossible."

Susan's sense of humour came to the rescue here and she laughed, for the idea of the modest Alfrey "dazzling" anybody was extremely comic.

That Julia should be so indignant and angry with her was painful, but she knew that, in time, Julia would come round; and, after all, it was Julia herself, and not Alfrey, who had broken off their engagement.

What upset Susan most was that Uncle Godfrey—her friend and champion from the time she came home from India a turbulent baby of two—Uncle Godfrey had completely withdrawn his favour from her. And justly withdrawn it, as things appeared to him.

He was disappointed, she knew. He had thought her so straight; and so, hitherto, she had thought of herself. And yet she had, seemingly, made all this trouble merely from a flirtatious desire to attract another girl's man.

Susan was quite honest with herself. She owned that this was so in the beginning, before she had even seen Alfrey. But when she had seen him, when she discovered that he was so strangely linked up with what had been the outstanding experience of her childhood, something stronger than either of them had taken hold of them both, and linked them together with a chain as strong as it was intangible.

Sir Godfrey was never "down on" people. He knew far too much about the secrets of their hearts; but he had his standards, and from his point of view Susan had fallen below them and he could

find no excuse for her. And this did hurt most terribly.

Another thing, too, hurt—she heard nothing whatever from Alfrey.

Was he very miserable? she wondered.

Did he know she had been sent away from Woodlands in disgrace quite late in the evening?

And, if he knew, surely he would connect such sudden expulsion with himself, and be sorry.

The little stone Cupid with the broken bow had done his work effectually with Susan. She owned it frankly to herself. Surely she was not mistaken in thinking that the Alfrey of that enchanted garden, the Alfrey of that sunny Sunday at Aylberne, loved her, as she loved him, simply because he couldn't help it.

The proud Colletts, the women, were not wont to give their love unasked, and she knew that in her heart of hearts she was assured that Alfrey had been on his mental knees to her ever since their first meeting. But she did wish he would *say* something. She did not ask or expect him to proclaim his love for her. That, so soon after his break with Julia, would be neither decent nor kind to Julia. But she did long to know definitely from himself that he loved her.

The loneliness, Aunt Myrtle's constantly expressed disapproval, and the silence, were hard to bear at a time when she had no conscious rectitude

to support her. The dormouse conscience was awake with a vengeance; and the constant creaking of his cage, as he went round and round in it, gave her sleepless nights.

II

Julia—she really was “poor Julia” just then, however much Susan might resent the epithet—secluded herself at Woodlands. The demobilization of a marriage when the girl is of Julia’s class is a complicated business. Presents kept on arriving in spite of the notice in the papers, and everything had to be sent back. A horrible process that would lacerate the nerves of even the least sensitive. That done, she spent the next few days breathing closs upon the ashes of her love and luxuriating in a woe that was none the less sincere in that it was “produced” with all the stereotyped “props.”

Her father was much comforted by this fearless playing to the gallery, and treated her professionally exactly as he would have treated one of his most lucrative patients.

He made no attempt to “take her out of herself” by suggesting amusements or cheerful society. He knew from long experience that in the case of a “temperamental” woman to allow her to “dree her weird” unmolested, is practically to plunge

her into an inland sea of boredom so profound that the instinct of sheer self-preservation causes the afflicted one to swim for the shore and clutch at any floating spar to save herself from drowning.

He was gravely tender to Julia, always; but he asked nobody to the house. Moreover, he put off all the guests who had been asked before the fatal Saturday that had hastened the inevitable *débâcle*.

He never mentioned either Susan or Alfrey, and he spent as much time at Woodlands as his practice allowed.

On the Friday week he declared himself to be feeling tired and slack. Would Julia come with him to Biarritz for a fortnight? They'd take the car and the chauffeur and do it comfortably, motoring across France. It would be a real kindness to him if she would . . . and they were both sick of London just then. . . .

Julia swallowed the artfully prepared bait and fell into the trap with a joyous abandon that proved to her father how right his diagnosis had been. And that night as she was going to bed he took her in his arms and held her close, whispering: "My darling, am I horribly selfish that I can't help feeling ever so glad I've still got you?"

Even in the twentieth century there is something to be said for the right sort of father.

III

A fortnight after Susan had been sent back to Hove in disgrace, her brother, Robert, came down for the week-end and demanded to be taken for a long walk on Sunday morning. Aunt Myrtle, of course, disapproved, but she was always more lenient to her nephews than to her nieces, and excused Robert's attendance at church because "he was mewed up all the week in that horrid office."

Robert was the least good-looking of General Collett's children. True, he was tall and well-built, but his face was square, his nose crooked (it had been broken and badly set at school), his jaw heavy, and his eyes light grey, small, penetrating, and deeply set. He had, moreover, struck out a line for himself both in thought and in action; and he was up against the agreeable vagueness of his family for all he was worth.

He and Susan and Bingo set off through the Hove Recreation Ground, through Hove Park and across the Dyke Road till they reached the downs. When they'd gone about three miles, Robert called a halt. They found a nice sunny, dry patch and sat down, an exhausted Bingo sprawling between them, panting and licking them indiscriminately in abject devotion.

Robert scrutinized his sister sitting there silent

and still in the strong sunshine. He was observant and the night before had noticed a change in Susan. She was thinner, and when she talked there was no sign of dimples. They seemed to have been flattened out. She was rosy enough just now after their three-mile tramp, but last night he thought her looking pale, almost faded. He had, like the rest of the family, heard the Julia story and Susan's connection with it. He had never met Alfrey Stowe, but he was ready to damn him to all eternity if he'd had any hand in making Susan look like this.

"Sue," he said suddenly, "have you ever made up your mind what you're going for in life?"

"How d'you mean, Robert? How can I 'go' for anything particular? I only wish I could. I'm heartily sick of my present existence: no home, not much fun, and just now—well, you know what it's like just now."

"That's what I want to get at. What is it like just now, and why?"

"If you want to know what it's like, try to picture yourself with nothing definite to do except take out Bingo and go messages for Aunt Myrtle. Go to tea-fights and bazaars with Aunt Myrtle; meet elderly relatives and a few friends of Aunt Myrtle; get up and go to bed and eat your meals to the tune of Aunt Myrtle's questions and com-

ments—especially questions. That's what it's like."

"And pretty damnable too," Robert added.

"Utterly damnable," Susan agreed.

"Then why in the name of common sense do you go on doing it?"

"One must live somewhere, I suppose, till father and mother come back. Woodlands is closed to me. Aunt Em is at Harrogate with Uncle Charles for his cure, and just now, while I'm under this cloud, one place seems about as good as another."

"I'd like to know why you are under this cloud? I'd like to know exactly how much you are implicated in this bust-up of Julia's, and if you really *are* implicated—why? Can you give me a clear answer or any answer to these questions? You're in a mental fog, and it might help to blow it away."

"No; I'm not in a mental fog, but I am indeed under a cloud of inky blackness, because, my dear, I am supposed—and rightly supposed—to have been instrumental in upsetting Alfrey's and Julia's marriage."

"Bravo, Susan! That's quite definite. Now go on to explain (that is, if you don't mind—I've no wish to be prying) why you were the instrument you speak of."

"Because, Robert, it happened so."

"I see. No accounting for these things. The blind god and all the rest of it. But, tell me, did you *try* to shake that chap's allegiance to Julia?"

"I did not."

"Good. Then, as you say, 'it happened.' May I ask whether the instrument herself was affected by the tremors that detached him from Julia?"

"She was and is."

"Then, in heaven's name, what is she going to do about it?"

"Do! How can she do anything?"

"You mean it's for him to do something?"

"That's how it seems to me."

"And quite naturally. But, my good lass, you've got to think of this—Does that chap know that you *are* implicated? If he does, then I'd like to kick him hard. If he doesn't, isn't it possible that he's playing doggo simply from a sincere desire to keep you out of it?"

"I never thought of that."

Robert was lying on his back with his hat pulled over his eyes, but at this he sat up suddenly and shook an accusing finger at Susan.

"You're like all the rest of them," he said. "You never, never deduce anything from the simplest data."

"Which is equivalent to saying you think us all stupid. Perhaps you're right—but in this

matter of deductions, don't you think people much given to deduce this from that, are likely just as often to be wrong as to be right? It's a dangerous process."

"It all depends on the circs. and on the disposition of the deducer. Listen, Susan—are you going to marry this man?"

"Certainly—if he asks me, but he never has."

Robert whistled. "There's no uncertain sound about you—you're coming on. Have you ever thought what an almighty row there will be when you announce your intention?"

"What's the good of worrying about that when he hasn't asked me?"

"Now, you're hedging again—be straight. Let's get this thrashed out. Do you believe he is in love with you?"

"Such is my belief."

"And your grounds for that belief?"

"I've got no grounds—not an inch of solid, tangible, visible ground—as yet."

"Has he ever kissed you?"

"Never. I wish he had—it would be something to remember—but we're not swine, and he was engaged to Julia."

"Then how in the world——?"

"My dear Robert," Susan interrupted, "you are not the only person in the world who can make deductions: from things he has left unsaid. . . ."

"You are coming on. But now face up to this: what do you intend to do when he does ask you?"

"Run away with him, I suppose. It would save such a lot of bother."

"And be cowardly and a confession that you don't think he's up to the standards of your family. I wouldn't thank you for that if I were Alfrey Stowe——"

"Robert, do you really mean that?" She laid her hand on her brother's arm and looked anxiously into his eyes.

"I do mean it. If you care for that man, if you want to be happy with him afterwards, you've got to face up to things. No one can prevent your marrying him. You're twenty-two, and if he likes to take you without a single sixpense, and if you like to go to him and ask for everything down to your very shoe-laces . . ."

The colour had died out of Susan's cheeks. "You mean," she said, "that I'd be a burden on him."

"I mean that if you really love him and are proud of him, you'll fight for his recognition by your family. If you want every one for all time to believe he behaved badly to Julia—and I'm not at all sure that he didn't—but if you want to rub it in so that it's *never* forgotten, then run away with him."

Susan sat silent. The sun went in behind a

cloud. Robert shivered and looked at his watch.

"We must go back," he said, "or we'll be late for lunch."

And never again during his week-end at Norton Road did Robert mention Alfrey Stowe or Julia to Susan. But he had to listen to a good deal about both of them from Aunt Myrtle.

"He's a dear boy," she said to Susan, when he had caught an early train to town on Monday, "a dear, straightforward fellow, but I could wish he wasn't quite so gruff."

CHAPTER XX

I

ALFREY was under the impression that Susan was still at Wimbledon. Convinced that Julia would be far too proud to own that she even suspected any faltering in his allegiance, he decided that she would attribute their break purely to the "impossibility" of his mother, possibly of himself as well.

He had reckoned without the host of spiteful feelings that assail a woman scorned, who was jealous into the bargain; and he was rather behind the times in his belief in feminine pride and reticence where wounded susceptibilities were concerned.

Julia cared little about saving her own face if by sacrificing it she could effectually scratch Susan's, and in this she had the satisfaction of knowing she had been successful.

She even went so far as to confide the whole story, with skilful embroideries and excisions, to a mutual friend of her own and Alfrey's, one Mrs. Lavender, who was almost as ardent a collector of geniuses as was Julia herself.

Just after Julia had gone to France with Sir Godfrey, this Mrs. Lavender met Alfrey at a private view of some very modern sculpture and took him back with her in the motor to tea in Park Lane.

They happened to be alone, and, greatly to his discomfort, she proceeded to discuss *l'affaire* Julia with the utmost frankness.

She talked and Alfrey listened with an occasional murmur of acquiescence or grunt of disagreement till he heard her saying: "And you know, dear Mr. Stowe, if you really do care anything about that other girl, you really ought to go to her rescue. From the way Julia gloated over it, I gather that she's having a positively mediæval time—watched and guarded and nagged at and treated like a criminal, because she was too honest to deny that perhaps she had a hand in detaching you—according to Julia, who really is too vindictive: fond as I am of her, I think she's carried this a bit too far. I feel quite sorry for the other girl, and it's all because of you, you know."

"Will you be good enough," Alfrey said, in an icy voice, "to say all that again, if you are sure of your facts."

Mrs. Lavender was quite sure of her facts, and was more than willing to say it all over again, with further comments and amplifications.

Alfrey thanked her; gave her no clue whatever

as to his own feelings; took his leave and went out into an exceedingly cold, wet April evening, and walked and walked and walked.

He choked, he swore, his eyes smarted with unshed tears. He called himself poltroon!—ass!—cur!—to have left her to face the yapping chorus alone.

Poor, brave, beautiful, sweet-voiced Susan. He dined at a restaurant in exceedingly wet clothes and went out and walked in the pouring rain again.

When he got back to his chambers his fire was out, and he sat by the ashes, still in his wet clothes, composing letters to her.

But he had no idea where she was. Perhaps she had joined her parents in the South of France. Perhaps she was back again with that aunt at Hove, but he had forgotten the number of the house in Norton Road. . . .

What must she think of him, that Susan of his? What excuse could she find for him?

Finally he remembered Sir Godfrey's consulting rooms in Harley Street. He was ready now to believe anything of Julia; but her father, he was sure, would never tamper with anybody's letters.

By this time his head ached, his bones ached, he was hot and cold and desperately thirsty. He had all the good old "Mespot" symptoms, took a

large dose of quinine and went back to his desk to write letter after letter to Susan and tear them up.

Finally he typed an envelope for what he was quite certain was the most inept and ridiculous of all the letters he had written that night, stamped it and went to bed.

His char came in the morning to make his bed and cook his breakfast. He refused to get up and couldn't eat any breakfast, but he did just remember to ask her to post his letter to Susan.

II

After that things got mixed.

A man on the same staircase came to see him in the evening. Presently another man, whom he had never seen, came back with the first one; poked cold things on to his aching chest and listened; stuck a beastly thermometer under his tongue and held it there for hours; held his wrist and looked at a watch. . . .

And presently people took him away in an ambulance to a nursing home, and he forgot everything but his pains and aches and general discomfort.

Next day but one his char, who was a tidy person, collected all the letters that had come by various posts and put them in a drawer that happened to be open in his writing-table, and shut it.

III

Aunt Myrtle had a headache and was breakfasting in bed.

The post came in and there were two letters for Susan. One from Hugh at Winchester, one with a typewritten address sent on by Sir Godfrey's secretary from his consulting rooms at Harley Street.

Who on earth could have addressed a letter to her at Harley Street?

She saw that Aunt Myrtle's tray was properly arranged, stood up Aunt Myrtle's letters against the toast-rack, and, when the parlourmaid had taken the tray and shut the door behind her, Susan opened Hugh's letter first. It asked her to meet him in London next morning and lunch with him. He had got a few days' leave and was on his way to Market Harboro' for some races.

Would Aunt Myrtle let her go? It was decent of Hugh.

Then she opened the typewritten envelope and gave a little gasp. She knew the writing, and it was a long letter.

It started abruptly and without any customary invocation:

"Somehow—because you are the quickest-feeling and most subtly sensitive woman I have ever met

—I think you *must* know that for me you are the one woman out of all the world; dearest and best. I'm not going to pretend even to myself that you don't know this. I won't explain or extenuate (there can be no extenuation). I believe you are wise enough and large-minded enough to understand and forgive stupidity—even such crass idiocy as mine.

“But is there any hope that you can care for me in return—even a little?—in the way I care for you?

“I have no sword now wherewith to glorify you, and even if I had I'm not at all sure that in my hands it would be a very glorious weapon; but, by heaven, if you care for fame, my pen is vowed to your service. I know my limitations, but there's no miserable modesty about me where my work is concerned—and every line I write shall be for you, and by no mere formal dedication either. Spiritually, it will be yours because you are of the spirit—the sweetest thing upon God's earth.

“Susan, do you understand how desperately I want you?—need you?—long and crave and hunger for you?—simply because if you do love me it will be me you will love, the fumbling, awkward, absurd, shy, stumbling fellow that I am—that you only can understand, and, understanding, pardon.

"It is horrible for me to think that you, perhaps, have suffered inconvenience, perhaps scoldings, perhaps even wrongful suspicion, because of me. I could chop myself in little pieces, responsible as I fear I am for bringing trouble and annoyance upon you.

"I may be but a poor sort of fellow, Susan, but I'm yours, body and soul and brain, to take or leave . . . and if there's any hope of your taking me, I'd not be a poor sort of fellow any more. I'll try to be worthier of you—kind, beautiful, golden-voiced Susan.

"If you knew how I hunger and thirst to hear your voice.

"Where are they keeping you in prison?

"For God's sake send a word of some sort to your devoted servant,

"ALFREY STOWE."

IV

"Why, Miss Susan, you haven't even poured out your coffee nor touched your breakfast."

Susan roused herself with a start, for Elsie, the parlourmaid, had come to clear away.

She drank some cold coffee, swallowed some toast and tried to look unconcerned and casual . . . failing utterly.

It was well that Aunt Myrtle's room was darkened

when Susan went to ask her whether she might go up to London to meet Hugh. Such bright eyes and flushed cheeks accompanied by so subdued a manner would undoubtedly have aroused Aunt Myrtle's suspicions had she not been really prostrate with headache.

"Hugh wants to see you?" she murmured faintly. "Luncheon to-morrow? I see no reason why you shouldn't go up and lunch with him, if you'll promise me not to rush off and see some other young man in his rooms."

"I promise," Susan said, meekly, "that I won't go near anybody's rooms; I don't often, truly. Hugh's train is due at Waterloo 12.45, and I'll meet that, see him off at St. Pancras and catch the first train on here from Victoria. I can come to Brighton and take a bus."

"Well, you may go unless I'm worse. If I'm not better by lunch-time, we must get Dr. Ware."

Susan put an eau-de-Cologne compress on her aunt's head, shook up her pillows, gave her aspirin and a hotter bottle, and went downstairs to write a telegram to Hugh and a letter to Alfrey.

"My dear," she wrote, "I love you, and there will be the most awful row when we break it to them . . . and unfortunately we can't break it to them just yet. It would hardly be decent—would it?—because of Julia.

"I have to meet my brother Hugh at Waterloo to-morrow . . . if you were there—by the book-stall at twelve—we might just see one another.

"Please be there, Alfrey, if you possibly can. I've been so miserable and want you so.

"SUSAN."

She went out and despatched both telegram and letter herself. And as she dropped her letter into the slot at the Hove post office she reflected that people who are bullied almost invariably resort to deceit. "Father always says that's why the Armenians are such unpleasant people," she thought. "I do hope I'm not growing like them. I'd rather be like the Turks."

CHAPTER XXI

I

TWELVE o'clock and the bookstall at Waterloo. Susan was punctual. Alfrey was not.

Five minutes past.

Ten minutes past.

Half-past.

No Alfrey.

A good many men looked curiously at the pretty girl hovering about that bookstall.

For very shame she spent as long a time as possible in choosing some magazines to take back to Aunt Myrtle.

She made a tour of platforms in that enormous station, lest Alfrey might have chosen to go to some other bookstall, but there was no sign of him.

Hugh's train was signalled and Alfrey had not come.

"Susan, my girl, what's the matter?" Hugh asked, while they were lunching at the Ritz. "Your clothes are all right, but you look some-

how as if you'd been rubbed out. Surely you're not fretting over that silly Julia fuss?"

"Not fretting exactly, Hugh, but of course I was most awfully sorry."

"I can't see why you should be, even if it was a bit your fault—and I'm perfectly sure it wasn't."

"Hugh dear, I'm very much afraid that it was . . . to a certain extent, and now—I'm being punished."

"Rot!" he exclaimed. "Why accept punishment for such a d——d silly reason? What if that chap did find you rather a high looker—you are, you know; we all are—he needn't have lost his head."

"But, Hugh, he never did."

"Then, in the name of commonsense, what's all this song and dance about?"

"I'd rather not talk about it, if you don't mind . . . it's all so complicated."

Hugh looked hard at his sister, and decided that this was not the moment to ask her if she had any spare cash. Instead, he bade her drink up her wine, and saw that she did it; and he paid the bill himself. As a family the Colletts were not demonstrative, but they knew how to comfort one another in trouble.

Susan felt that Hugh was being extra kind to her, and loved him for it.

She had gone out in the morning with flags

flying and drums beating. She went back in the afternoon like a conquered army, the remnant of herself.

Even Aunt Myrtle remarked how tired she looked.

The Collett women were quite accustomed to men who had things to do. Things that had to be done, whether in work or sport. Susan did not expect that any man would be constantly at her beck and call, but she did think that when he got her letter Alfrey might have wired to her that he couldn't meet her at Waterloo.

She had answered his letter by return of post quite early. He would get it last night.

She didn't blame him. She didn't even criticize him; but she was puzzled. Puzzled and a little pained.

To-day was Wednesday. Surely she would hear by the first post to-morrow.

But Thursday, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday passed and there was no letter from Alfrey.

No letter, no telegram. No Alfrey himself.

Susan's perplexity changed to alarm.

A week—nothing.

Ten days—nothing. Susan was tortured by anxiety she could share with no one.

She did not doubt him. But she was absolutely certain now that something dreadful had happened.

She read *The Times* with meticulous care.

Aunt Myrtle, who had got over her headache, approved this new seriousness in Susan. Far better to read the news than spend money and time upon silly novels written by horrid people, who were always in hot water in their matrimonial affairs.

Surely, Susan reasoned, any accident to such a distinguished young author would be chronicled in *The Times*. Always before there had been things about Alfrey in the papers. Julia had shown her dozens. Now, when she hungered and thirsted for the smallest word about him, there was nothing.

When she caught sight of her own face in a looking-glass, she saw that every day it grew more and more like the Reynolds portrait in the gallery at Aylberne. She bought all sorts of papers and read them feverishly, but there was nothing.

Then one day just after lunch she saw it:

"Among the sufferers from the prevailing and unexpectedly late epidemic of influenza is Mr. Alfrey Stowe, the well-known novelist, who has been seriously ill for some days in a nursing home."

The printing and the paper ran together into long grey lines. There was a rushing in her ears—so loud that she looked nervously across at Aunt Myrtle, who was dozing in her chair on the other side of the fire.

Aunt Myrtle was still asleep. She hadn't heard. Alfrey was seriously ill, perhaps dying, and she would never see him again, never be able to show him how much she loved him.

Hesper had died.

Alfrey was dying, perhaps already dead.

They had kept her from Hesper and Hesper had died.

Nothing should keep her from Alfrey.

She got up softly from her chair, taking care not to rustle the paper.

Silently as a shadow she moved to the door. Like nearly all big people, Susan could be very quiet when she chose.

She blessed the well-ordered house where door-handles had to turn noiselessly and hinges were always oiled.

She was on the outside of the door.

It was shut, and Aunt Myrtle had not stirred or called to her.

The clock in the hall struck half-past two.

She rushed up to her room, put on her hat and coat and went out into Norton Road. But not before she had scribbled a card for Aunt Myrtle and put it in the hall: "Called away suddenly to see a sick friend. Don't wait dinner, but I'll try to be back."

There was a bus went along Cromwell Road to Brighton station. She'd catch the next train to

Victoria or London Bridge. Surely there was something about three.

She tore up Eaton Gardens and caught the bus at the top. The driver saw her, liked her looks, and slowed down for her to board it.

II

It was only when she reached London and the taxi-man said, "Where to, Miss?" that she remembered that *The Times* had said nothing as to which nursing home Alfrey was in.

Never mind, she would go to his chambers. If no one was there, she'd knock at every door on his staircase till she found out where he was.

Julia had often described his rooms to her, and somebody in the building would be certain to know.

She was past caring what anybody thought. She would see Alfrey once more. No, not "once more." She would see Alfrey.

She would, she would, she would.

They must let her.

She paid the taxi-man and ran up the staircase. Alfrey's name would not be painted on the outer door, because he was not a barrister. Susan knew that.

Up and up she went, scanning each door as she passed.

Ah! At last! His visiting-card pinned over the real tenant's name—and the door was ajar.

Timidly, pausing to get her breath—she had come with such a rush—she pushed it open a little further and went into the passage.

The sitting-room door was ajar too, and there was a fire in it. She could see the reflection of dancing flames on the glass of pictures on the wall. She peeped in.

A sofa was pulled up in front of the fire and Alfrey, white and thin and still, was lying on it, covered by a rug.

She shut the door behind her and he turned his head.

“Susan!” he cried. “You!”

She was beside him, down on her knees, and clasping him. Kiss for kiss she gave him; and happy tears and tremulous laughter; the blissful laughter of lovers that hides a tiny sob.

He held her dear flushed face away from him in his two hands, that he might look into her eyes.

“Why,” he asked, “did you never answer my letter? Did you not get it?”

“I got it and I answered it by return of post. I wrote the address so carefully and I posted it myself. I asked you to meet me at Waterloo, but you never came, and I looked everywhere. I waited and waited but you never came, and I was so miserable. But I kept *your* precious letter

—always I shall keep it. I made a little bag for it, and I wear it round my neck on a long thin chain that grandfather gave me when I was seventeen.”

“Are you sure you posted it?” he asked presently. “I want that darling letter. Are you sure you put the right address?”

“It hasn’t come back to me, and I know it was right. You ought to have got it that night. My writing is quite clear, not scrabbly and difficult like yours.”

“Everything about you is crystalline clear, you blessed, blessed Susan.”

“Oh, my dear,” she said, with a little sob, “it has been such a horrible week—I thought you might die . . . and I’d never be able to tell you——”

Mrs. Stowe, who had been living in Alfrey’s chambers and going to the nursing home every day, had brought him back that morning at his urgent request, for he was sick of the nursing home. She was the more willing because she felt that at the chambers she could cook for him herself, and feed him up. She had tasted the beef-tea they gave him, and thought it poor stuff.

She had been down to the porter to speak about another bed that had been hired to come that

afternoon, for she was much too large for the sofa in his sitting-room, and she wouldn't hear of his sleeping on it till he was really well.

Her talk with the porter had been somewhat longer than she expected, and she climbed the stairs rather more quickly than usual. She was not used to stairs, and felt breathless and done when she reached Alfrey's door. Her box was in the passage, and she sat down on it to get her breath before she should see Alfrey.

Suddenly she noticed that the sitting-room door was shut. It had been open when she left. Had he felt a draught, she wondered, and crept across the room to close it? She hoped he'd covered himself again if he had.

Suddenly she sat up very straight and listened. Someone was talking in there.

Who in the world had got in to upset Alfrey in the few minutes she had been gone?

Very softly she got up, turned the handle of the door and opened it and looked in, and almost fell back upon the box again.

Noiselessly she smote her hands together. "Then Claire was right," she thought, "and they did behave bad to Julia, but I can't scold him now . . . he's too weak."

"I wish," she heard Susan say, "that I'd burned my boats, that there was no going back, that I was comfortably ruined and could stay here with,

you—but none of them would believe me if I said I was.”

“Of course they wouldn’t believe you”—from Alfrey.

Interlude, while Mrs. Stowe shook her head, smiling, though, and pleased.

“You know, my dear,” Susan’s voice went on, “the elders are always telling us how bad we are, and how we’ve no morals and all the rest of it, but they’re not nearly so ready to believe the worst of us as they were. Take Shakespeare, now—we’re constantly being told how lovely and good and sweet and gracious his women are.”

“Well, they *are*, you know.”

“And yet all their own people were ready to believe the worst of them on no evidence at all.”

“For example, dear Shakespearean student?”

“Look at Hero! D’you mean to tell me that if I chose to ‘talk to a man out of a window’ between one and two in the morning—at Norton Road, for instance—that you and my family would at once conclude the worst? You’d all probably think I’d gone mad; and neighbours might complain that I disturbed their slumbers—but neither you nor Aunt Myrtle nor anybody would believe of me what that swine Claudio and most of poor Hero’s friends believed of her—now would you?”

"That's one, I grant you—now for another?"

"Well, Juliet (I know these two plays, because I've *seen* them both). Would it occur to any decent girl nowadays to ask her young man, 'If that thy bent of love be honourable, thy purpose marriage'? You've never even asked me to marry you, yet here I am!"

Rather unsteadily Mrs. Stowe got up on to her feet, coughed loudly and rattled the handle of the door as she stood on the threshold.

Susan turned in Alfrey's arms and smiled at her but made no attempt to disentangle herself.

"Is this bad for him?" she asked.

Mrs. Stowe beamed at Susan, but shook her finger accusingly at her son as she asked: "Alfrey, did you know she was coming? Was that why you were so set on getting back this morning?"

"He didn't know, dear Mrs. Stowe," Susan said, getting up from her knees. "And I didn't know either—this morning. But when I read in *The Times* that he'd been ill, I just came! And soon, I suppose, I must be going back."

"Not till you've had tea," Mrs. Stowe said. "I'm just going to get it."

"I wish," Susan said presently, "that there was no going back; that I could just stay here with you and Alfrey. It seems so flattening to have to catch the 6.30 and face Aunt Myrtle at

dinner when I might stay here and help you to get it."

"You must go back," Mrs. Stowe said firmly, because you're not going to marry my Alfrey in any hole-and-corner way. You talk to your aunt, my dear; you talk to your aunt nicely in that pretty voice of yours and get her on your side before you tell the others. If I'm not mistaken, Miss Collett's one that likes to be first, and if you go about it tactful, why, you'll get her on your side from the beginning, and then your dear parents'll soon come round. After all, there's nothing to *object* to in Alfrey. He's quite superior."

Susan laughed. "That's just what he mustn't try to be with me. I've told him already that I'm never going to be afraid of him and say that I like things when I don't—just to please him—or pretend I understand things when I don't understand, or admire things that I don't admire because it's 'in the movement' to do it. I'm quite willing to try and learn all he likes to teach me about style and things, but I'm not going to pretend. I often did with Julia because she was so scornful, and I hated to be thought out of things—but I never shall with Alfrey."

"Thank God for that!" Alfrey said.

When Susan had gone, Mrs. Stowe went and sat on the one small chair in the tiny kitchen.

Her head ached and she felt bewildered. She shed a few tears and blew her nose; pulled herself together, and set about getting Alfrey's dinner. Then the men came with the bed and she had to see it set up in the little sitting-room.

When she had fed Alfrey and seen him comfortably settled for the night in the one bedroom of the chambers, she cleared up and finally went to bed herself, tired in body but wakeful and nervous. When at last she dozed off, it was with the thought: "And now, I'll warrant, I shall hear more about Susan Collett than ever. And how Claire will crow over me to be sure! I could wish they hadn't been in such a hurry."

CHAPTER XXII

SUSAN'S train was late, and in spite of the fact that she took a taxi back to Norton Road, she only arrived at five minutes to eight. She dashed upstairs to take off her hat and wash her hands, and appeared in the drawing-room just as the gong sounded.

Aunt Myrtle, majestic and displeased, was standing by the fire. She was always *décolleté* in the evening, even when she dined quite alone, but if any nephews or nieces were present she was the more careful to display plenty of her handsome neck and shoulders. She scorned the feeble generation that wore tea-gowns or white fur coats or stoles at night indoors, when, during the day, they braved the most arctic weather in the thinnest of suede shoes and silk stockings. Susan, in her coat-frock, felt like a little shop-girl beside her.

"I'm very sorry not to dress, Aunt Myrtle," she apologized, "but I've only this moment got back, and I thought . . ."

"I heard your arrival," Miss Collett interrupted coldly, "and that you came in a taxi. Surely an unnecessary expense?"

"I would have been still later if I hadn't taken one."

By this time they were in the dining-room. As Aunt Myrtle lifted her first spoonful of soup she said: "Perhaps now you will kindly explain where you have been—and who is your sick friend? Is she better?"

"It's a long story," Susan answered. "I'll tell you all about it after dinner. Let us dine in peace first. I'm so hungry."

Throughout the excellent, well-served meal Aunt Myrtle watched Susan. Yes; there was no doubt about it, she was a beautiful girl. Distinguished too, which Aunt Myrtle considered infinitely more important than mere beauty.

They made an odd contrast, those two women, so strangely alike and so entirely different. The one dressed as if for some big reception, the other in the plain straight gown that was the mode of the moment.

When Aunt Myrtle's glass of port was poured out and the parlourmaid had left the room, she turned to Susan and said, "Now please."

Susan's knees were shaking, but she took the plunge. "I don't know whether you saw in the

papers that Alfrey Stowe was very ill. I went to see him."

Aunt Myrtle stared as though she couldn't believe her own ears.

"You went to see him? To-day? And why, pray?"

"Because," Susan said steadily, "I'm going to marry him, and I was very anxious."

"*You* are going to marry Alfrey Stowe! But only a few weeks ago I thought he was engaged to your cousin?"

"So he was, but it was a mistake. They didn't really care for one another."

Aunt Myrtle sipped her port. Susan, with trembling hands, was trying to peel a tangerine orange. But "courage mounteth with occasion," and her heart was beating steadily.

"Do you very much want that orange?" Aunt Myrtle asked, "because, if you don't, let us go into the drawing-room and thrash this out."

In the drawing-room Miss Collett arranged herself in her favourite chair, with a shaded lamp set a little way behind her on her left.

Elsie brought in coffee, and Susan drank hers eagerly.

Then she had an inspiration. She fetched a footstool and sat down upon it close to her aunt's

knees. She laid her arms on those silk-clad knees and said softly: "Aunt Myrtle, if you don't stand by us, I don't know what we shall do."

"Stand by you!—me!" Miss Collett exclaimed. "I'm the last person in the world that you can conceive of countenancing such a thing. I disapprove entirely. I think you're mad. Mind, I know that nothing and no one can stop your marrying this man if you insist upon doing so. You're of age, you're not a ward in chancery, and unfortunately parents no longer have the powers they once had—but if you expect me or any other member of the family to countenance such a marriage . . . you're very much mistaken. I should have thought you had too much pride to take Julia's leavings."

"But that's just it," Susan said. "Julia was only an interlude. He was in love with me first, only he didn't know it."

"How could he have been in love with you first when he never saw you till he was engaged to Julia?"

"Listen, Aunt Myrtle. Nobody must know what I'm going to tell you—nobody but you. It's a long story and very complicated, but Alfrey said I *must* tell you, because, you see, you're really almost like my mother."

The warm young body pressed against her

knees; the eager clasping arms about her gave to Myrtle Collett a curious sense of being swamped in something strong and delicious and intoxicating. People did not confide in her as a rule. She was too censorious, too inquisitive. This sense of being confided in was strange and exciting. She was thrilled to think that she was hearing all sorts of things that the rest of the family did not know, and as Susan unfolded the story of the lost book, their meeting at the Brownies, and their encounter in the little old garden at Aylberne, she began to feel at one moment as though she too was impressionable and impetuous, and at the next to reflect complacently that if she was middle-aged she still had a good deal of influence in the family. That her brother and his wife depended upon her judgment; that the children still looked to her for house-room and sympathy—quite a new idea this last, new and flattering. Moreover, she suddenly discovered that Susan had always been her favourite niece, and rather like her. She felt a vicarious satisfaction in the fascinations of Susan.

Altogether it was the most emotional evening she had passed for a very long time. Even the raids had not given her that queer tremulous feeling about the knees.

It was nearly twelve o'clock when she and Susan went upstairs to bed and poor Dawson had

considerable difficulty in keeping awake during the nightly hair-brushing.

In spite of Aunt Myrtle's alliance, it took what seemed to the lovers an interminable time to soften General Collett, even though Alfrey, almost as soon as he could stand, rushed over to meet them in Paris and plead his cause in person.

In the end, however, as Mrs. Stowe had predicted, they all "came round," for they all loved Susan.

"It is true that they wondered at her choice, those handsome Colletts—but, after all, he was a successful writer, and writing in their eyes—though it seemed an odd way of making a living—was certainly a degree better than pawnbroking or money-lending.

The young people were fathoms deep in love. Anyone could see that. And all the world loves lovers.

It is true that Alfrey Stowe was plain—but what was it that one of those writing chaps had said ages ago:

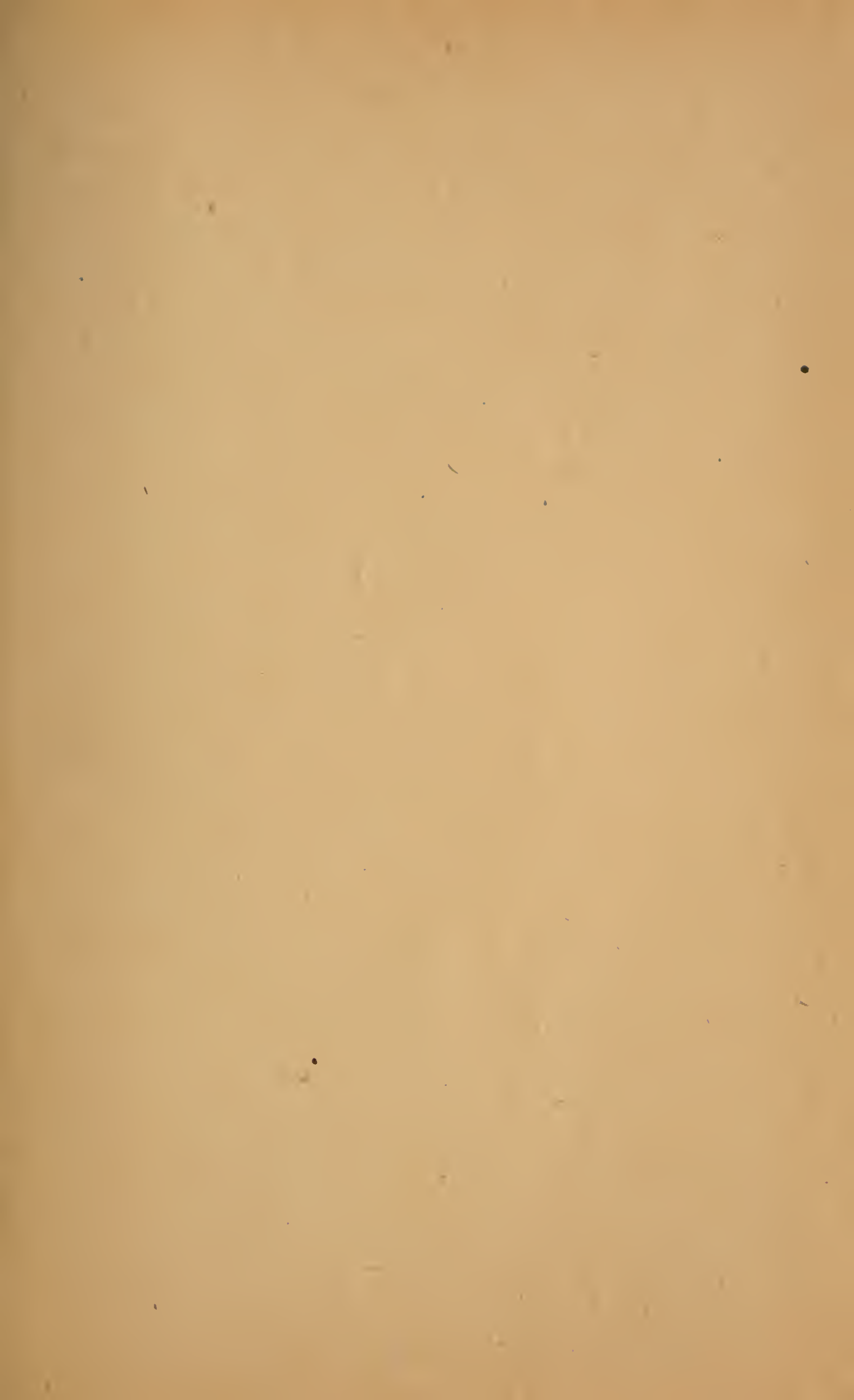
"Love looks not with the eyes but with the mind;
And therefore is winged Cupid painted blind."

Not the little old Cupid with the broken bow.

His eyes were not bandaged. He could see clearly and far.

Susan even wondered whether he knew that on her wedding day, instead of a bouquet, she carried a handful of sweet brier from his garden.

THE END



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